

The GOLDEN HORSESHOE



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BEATRICE

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CHAPTER I

THE ARTISTIC ATMOSPHERE

A NOISY knocking startled Corbyn, brush in hand before his canvas and scowling blackly at the bare studio walls.

It precluded the entrance of a prosperous-looking youth, trimly attired in tight-fitting garments of pronouncedly English cut, and carrying a cane. From the soles of his neat shoes to the crown of his hat he was the very pink and pattern of decorous propriety. Even the plain leather watch-guard he wore outside his double-breasted waistcoat seemed but to emphasise the solidity of his social and financial standing; it was as though he had no need to advertise by means of a gold chain the fact that to the unseen end of it there was attached the eighteen-carat diamond-capped chronometer with which his great-grandfather had timed the attack at Waterloo.

He greeted the preoccupied artist genteelly and said with suave directness, "I wish you'd lend me a V, old chap. I haven't seen such a sight as a

cheque for centuries, and some infernal fellow's had the impudence to stick a dispossess on the door of my den. I think it would be wise to appease my landlord with at least a five-dollar bill."

Corbyn did not at once reply. He stood still, staring at his visitor, pipe in mouth, thumb in palette, a shadow on his forehead, only his eyes showing cognisance that he was not alone: a young man, thin-faced, tanned, athletic in appearance despite his careless studio dress, a man of open air propensities, of the stamp that they mint at Yale.

"Florian's dead, Allardyce," he at length answered, his tone unusually grave. "I'm empty-handed. I'm trying to get this canvas covered on the chance that it may fetch ——"

The other rose in haste from the decrepit chair on which he had cautiously seated himself, and drew from his waistcoat-pocket a rusty steel watch.

"The deuce!" he said, and moved towards the door. His exclamation spoke quick, sympathetic understanding.

"I'll be back within half an hour and bring some money with me."

Corbyn heard him clatter downstairs, and returned to his own task with a groan of disgust.

"I can't paint pictures; not to sell, at any rate," he told his usual confidant, the limp lay-figure which was all the model he could afford at that moment. "I never could. I'll never be able to.

"The only profitable opening on Fifth Avenue

for my brush is with the broom-and-helmet brigade!"

He glared at the very creditable sketch before him, and broke into doleful song:

"*'White—wings—that never—grow weary,'*" and from far below there came a voice which finished for him:

"*'They carry me—cheerily—over the—sea.'*"

His face lit up, he laid aside the implements of his craft and hurried out into the dingy hall-way as there came clambering up one not unlike himself in build but fairer of complexion, with twinkling Irish eyes, who forthwith embraced him.

"Dennis O'Dare presents Himself—in one act," said that gentleman a little breathlessly, and "Hello, Denny!" Corbyn cried in very genuine welcome. "Where have *you* sprung from? When did you get back to Broadway? How are you, eh? What's good?"

"Ask nothing more of me, sweet!" implored the newcomer with melodramatic gesture. "Ask nothing more, nothing more—until you've helped me to a little low seat and a big high-ball. These stairs are steeper every time I climb them, and —— What? *Nothing* doing! Ales, wines and spirits *all* run dry?"

"*Oh*, my prophetic soul, my Corbyn! How sharper is it than a serpent's tooth—to have an unquenched thirst!"

"I'm drefful sorry, Denny," Corbyn apologised, "but—there's something rotten in the state of my

exchequer. The oil and colour trade's gone back on me. I'm all to the bad this Fall, and—Florian's dead."

"Not Fifi's brother?"

"Fifi's brother. He died two days ago, and she's left penniless. His illness cost them everything. I've done all I could for them, which wasn't much, of course. And now I must see her through somehow; I promised him. That's why the cupboard's bare. I haven't even ——"

O'Dare held up a hand in protest. "You talk, talk, talk," he complained, "until my head goes round; and all *I* want to know is whether a ten would be of any use to you. I've got one in my jeans, and here it is. Now not another word, or you and I'll part in pain and anger, and —— Here's the British lion with a big bundle of filthy lucre.

"What ho, without! I give thee greeting, good my lord."

"What, Denny!" exclaimed the Englishman delightedly, dropping the bulky burden he had brought with him. "I'm deuced glad to see you again, old chap. Manhattan's been a howling wilderness since you set out for Bullion City. How d'ye do? Eh? I'm deuced glad to see you.

"Speaking of bullion, I've brought you an X, Corbyn. Best I could do at such short notice, and I'm afraid I'll have to take it out in board and lodging too—I've brought my bedding with me, you'll observe."

Corbyn looked anxious. "But—but you haven't given up your own place, have you, Allardyce?" he asked. "I should have told you ——"

"I'm homeless," answered Allardyce. "I've parted with all my worldly possessions except these blankets and the clothes I stand in for ten paper dollars—and a receipt for rent overdue, to date. My landlord let me go without so much as shedding a tear.

"Don't fuss. We'll camp here together until the next earthquake."

"But Denny's cashed in a ten for Fifi," Corbyn responded somewhat vexedly. "I wish I could have let you know in time."

"However, we'd better settle—you'd better settle between you how much ——"

"You talk, talk, talk!" snorted Dennis O'Dare. "Why don't you take the girl her twenty dollars, eh?"

"Cut loose," commanded Allardyce. "I haven't time to argue with you."

Corbyn obeyed with the greatest good will, and, after he had gone, his two guests grinned at each other genially.

"I'll stake my shirt you haven't even a bronze Indian left to bless yourself with," the actor ventured.

"Bet you a blanket I haven't any less than you," retorted his companion, and O'Dare laughed delightedly.

"I knew it! I knew it!" he asserted. "You'll

never prosper in business like me, my boy; you're too extravagant."

"I'm economical; I've got two silver dollars saved up. Yes, right here." He tapped a trouser-pocket. "And now you owe me a blanket. That's how I accumulate wealth."

"Poor Corbyn's still at outs with his dad?" he went on more gravely, and Allardyce nodded.

"The old man's as hard as nails," he replied. "He has no use for a son outside the business, and Corbyn's got about as much head for business as you or I, Denny. It's our misfortune, but I don't see that we should be blamed because we were born that way. And, after all, this is a free country. There's no law that I know of for forcing round pegs into square holes.

"If my father had been a business man and insisted on my following in his footsteps, I'd have followed. But within a week he'd have offered me half his remaining fortune to get out again, and stay out. Corbyn's too conscientious to stick the old gentleman for the price of experience, and all the return he's got for his scruples so far is the key of the street."

"He'll come out right side up in the end, all the same," said O'Dare. "I've known Corbyn ever since we were at college together. He'll stay the course, or drop dead—but he won't give up. And—Here he comes."

Corbyn looked depressed as he entered and threw

himself down on the rickety couch. He had stopped to open his letter-box in the hall-way both going and coming, but found it empty. "Poor Fifi!" he said presently. "It's not six months yet since she came over to nurse her brother, and now ——"

"Will she go back to Europe?" asked Allardyce. "What does she think of doing?"

The artist shook his head. "She hasn't a living soul to go to," he replied. "Stephan was all the world to her.

"No, she's made up her mind to stay right here and seek work till she finds it. She's just as plucky as her brother was, and just as proud. She won't be idle long, I'm sure, and with the money you two have put up for her she ought to manage. I had hard work to make her take it, but she's a dollar or two short since the funeral, and I succeeded in the end.

"She's been to see about a berth already, and ——"

He was about to express her gratitude and his for the most timely helping hand when O'Dare, foreseeing that, broke in:

"It's up to us three, then, to do a deal in futures," he suggested. "I'm on the kerb myself—the idle of Broadway, you know—and have been for so long that I've almost made up my mind to move."

"Then, why the devil did you turn in that ten?" Corbyn interposed. "I thought you had just got back to town and were still wallowing in wealth, or ——"

"Now don't butt in," O'Dare commented, in mild reproof. "Put that in your mouth, and smoke it while I occupy the pulpit." He produced three black cigars and passed them round.

"I may as well admit," he resumed, having lit his own, "that I've been back from Bullion City—falsely so called, I assure you—for a full month. I reached the Grand Central Station without a cent. That's why I haven't been here before, you'll understand—and there's no use kicking about it now, Corbyn.

"Since then I've worn a rut in the Rialto, with the usual result. My talents are thrown away in New York and I haven't been able to get grub-wages to go on the Road again. I've even tried vaudeville, with the same result. Nothing doing.

"I'm down and out," he ended abruptly.

"Me too," said Corbyn with a wry grimace. "I chucked the illustrating game for Art with a big A before I ought to, and forthwith ceased to earn a living."

They looked at Allardyce, and he took up the tale. "My expenses in Manhattan," he said precisely, "seem to exceed my earning capacity by some three hundred and fifty per cent. I haven't sold a manuscript for months, so last night I burned the lot. It bores me to think about things. I'm going on the wallaby again. That's my short story."

"Then we're all three in the same street—which

is Queer Street," O'Dare summed up judicially. "Who knows of any way out?"

"I'm going on the wallaby again," repeated Allardyce, "and that's as good a way as any."

The actor looked intently at him. "But is it wide enough for three?" he asked, with evident anxiety. "Don't joke about it, Allardyce. I'm all in earnest."

"For twenty," the other assured him, and Corbyn also looked relieved. "Here it is. Light the gas and see for yourselves."

He drew forth an apparently empty pocket-book, from which he extracted a newspaper-clipping, and handed the latter to O'Dare.

Corbyn struck a match and lit a stump of candle—"The gas supply's cut off," he explained—whereafter Dennis read aloud:

" 'Wanted—Twenty young men for extremely hazardous exploring expedition: must be acquainted with the use of fire-arms and be able to stand severe marching: mounted: ex-soldiers preferred. Write full particulars to Barr, Amberley House, Mobile, Ala.' "

He rose, and, making joyful outcry, pranced about the room.

"Now isn't that a lucky strike!" he cried. "Where did you ——"

"I cut it out of Sunday's paper," Allardyce proceeded, while his friends listened with breathless interest, "and wrote the amiable Barr that afternoon.

"Here's his reply."

He passed to O'Dare a telegram from Mobile which said:

"Look out for Rose, Fifth Avenue Hotel, Manhattan, Saturday morning ten."

And that was all. There was no signature.

"Anything else?" asked Corbyn, and Allardyce shook his head.

"To-morrow's Saturday," said O'Dare, and they all fell silent.

The candle stump burned out, and still they sat there smoking contemplatively. Outside, in Twenty-third Street, it was snowing. The surface-cars slipped past without their customary whiz and rattle. There was no rumble of wheels on the asphalt. Only a subdued murmur, very different from the ordinary staccato outcry of the traffic there, came skywards as far as the studio.

"It's very quiet here," Allardyce remarked inconsequently.

"The building is empty after business hours except for this floor," Corbyn answered. "Do you think there's anything in that advertisement?"

"It reads like revolution," O'Dare suggested, and the indifferent Englishman nodded entire agreement.

"And what if it does?" the Irishman added doubtfully, his mind made up.

"A revolution, in our circumstances, is what we want. I'm with you, Allardyce."

"Wait a minute," begged Corbyn, and left the

room. He hurried downstairs to his letter-box. It was still empty, and the last mail delivery for the day had been made. He retraced his steps with bent head, a sudden, desperate resolution taking concrete shape in his mind. The reason therefor he expressed to himself in words, but beneath his breath, as he climbed the steep, dark staircase.

"I wouldn't have believed it of her," he whispered grievously. "I was poor enough before, God knows, but I'm bankrupt now, since she's deprived me of hope and faith."

"Count me in, too," he told his friends from the doorway, and was glad that the gloom hid his face from them.

"That's settled, then," said O'Dare in great glee. "And now put on your hats, brave hearts. I hear a still, small voice that tells me it's long past dinner-time. The banquet waits. We'll hie us to a restaurant and there celebrate this most suspicious ——"

"You cut along," amended Allardyce. "Corbyn and I ——" He choked as O'Dare, having laid hands on him after the manner of a professional strong man, propelled him towards the door.

"The dinners are on me, confound you!" cried that impetuous Thespian, and Corbyn followed meekly.

"We'll walk," explained the economical capitalist as they stepped out upon the slippery pavement in the direction of Sixth Avenue, "as far as a place I know where they fill you with artificial grape-juice,

garlic, and spaghetti for forty cents. The money that we save in car-fares we'll invest in cocktails lest we lose it. Come right in here." He led the way into a café before they could demur.

Two men pushed out through the swing-doors and paused to let them pass. Corbyn nodded coldly to one of them, who returned the compliment with foreign effusion.

"Who's your shifty-looking friend?" asked O'Dare, leaning opulently over the bar.

"He calls himself Gonzalez," the artist answered. "That's all I know about him besides the annoying fact that he seems to covet my studio. He came in yesterday to ask if I'd oblige him by moving. He's rented the one opposite and requires more room."

"I'd hate to meet him on a desert island," said O'Dare dryly, and comforted himself with a cocktail. "I wonder why he wants the whole house to himself; and wears a wig which doesn't match his moustache?"

Five minutes more took them to a bohemian haunt in Twenty-seventh Street, where they were warmly greeted by the careless cosmopolitans of their acquaintance whose meagre incomes forced them to frequent it. The diners were chiefly foreigners, actors, artists, musicians, a sprinkling of tradespeople, with here and there a stray couple or quartette of curiosity-seekers, their minds divided between detestation of the execrable table-wine and admiration of the insouciance with which Bohemia

quaffed it. And there were among the habitués not a few men of fallen fortune, facing the squalid present and a barren future to the full as cheerfully as they had squandered the good years behind them. The meal according to the *carte* was an imposing one for the price, but actually consisted of morsels: tunny-fish and olives, soup, a fragment of malodorous bass, a mouthful of doubtful veal, spaghetti, the wings of a far-travelled fowl, a spoonful of sloppy ice cream, black coffee. And, although Corbyn's father, the irascible millionaire who had bidden his only son to sink or swim as he would might have held up his hands in horror at the mere idea of such a dinner, that did not prevent his undutiful offspring from attacking with appetite all that came his way. While Allardyce, the man of family, a far-travelled epicure, was far too frankly hungry for question or cavil. Dennis O'Dare had often fared far worse in his experience of one-night stands on the long road he had elected to follow. He took whatever he could get, and asked for more.

Tongues wagged and babel broke loose as the tablecloths were cleared away, from motives of economy, while cheap cigars and cheaper cigarettes created a blue cloud before which all the strangers fled in fits of coughing. The double doors at the inner end of the long room were withdrawn, one seated himself at the piano in the alcove, another brought forth from a safe place his beloved violin, and on the silence which ensued there rose such music

as men may make who have sore hearts behind their shabby coats. They played for love as they could never play for payment, and the lost chord was theirs for once. It was a dead man's requiem. Corbyn had told them that Stephan Florian would no more come among them, and they had loved the silent exile for the magic of his touch upon the strings. He would be sadly missed there.

The place began to empty quietly, until only the three friends in misfortune remained. They stayed another hour for the sake of the warmth and light and comfort, and yet another that they might still more fully discuss Fifi Florian's future and finances.

Corbyn had been her brother's only intimate among many acquaintances and felt himself in some degree responsible for her safe guidance in the great city of which she knew so little. The other two were more than willing to back him up to the limit of their powers, and, before they finally rose to go, it had been arranged that they should mutually seek to enlist the sympathy of one or another of their more reliable women-friends on her behalf, that they should, if it were humanly possible, act as her bankers for so long as that might be necessary.

"And if she can handle a bow anything like as well as her brother did," said O'Dare more cheerfully, "it won't be much she'll have to take from us. Music of that sort's worth more than a gold-mine.

"Now where am I going to sleep to-night?"

"Corbyn can put us both up," Allardyce answered hospitably, and they returned to Twenty-third Street through the snow.

A single gas-jet was burning dimly on the studio stair, and Corbyn, fumbling with frozen fingers for the familiar key-hole, failed to find it. He struck a match and looked again. Then they stared limply at each other and their faces fell.

There was no key-hole in the heavy iron plate which had been screwed fast to the wood and was securely padlocked to the staple in another on the doorpost.

"They've locked us out of house and home," said O'Dare lugubriously. Allardyce grunted his disgust, while Corbyn frowned and bit his lip.

"It's too bad!" he protested wrathfully. "I've been too busy to keep count of the days of grace they granted me, and ——"

"And they've evicted you, the soulless rascals!" concluded O'Dare. "They seem to think that an artist has nothing to do with his money but squander it paying rent!"

The card which had served Corbyn for name-plate had been torn down.

There were but two other doors on the top landing, and one of these had recently been embellished with the name of J. Gonzalez in large white letters. No light was visible through the transom above it, and that individual was evidently not at home, but Corbyn shook his fist at it ere he turned to the second.

"I'll bet it was that ugly beast who egged them on to turn me out like this," he muttered. "He wants my room and this is how he means to get it.

"Let's see if my things are in the lumber-room—I have the key here, luckily.

"I thought so," he continued with rising anger. "They've shifted everything in here so that he may take possession in the morning."

"How would it do to camp among them till then?" asked Allardyce and peered in past him. The wisdom of his proposition was so obvious that no one gainsaid it. The shelter of the lumber-room was certainly preferable to the unsheltered street, and O'Dare had already calculated their remaining cash capital at twenty cents.

There were abundant blankets, and sufficient space under the rafters for a dozen men. Cold moonlight flooded the garret. They closed the door and made themselves as comfortable as might be.

"I only hope Gonzalez won't shout fire and thieves when he hears Denny snoring," whispered the Englishman. "It would be deuced awkward to be asked for explanations regarding this picnic, and still more so to be turned out into the snow.

"Phew! but I'm sleepy. Look not upon the wine when it is red ink, Corbyn, my boy. That was pure laudanum we had to dinner, Denny.

"Let's turn in. There's nothing else to do, and we'll be all the fresher for an early start after a good sleep."

He rolled his outer garments up in the shape of a rough pillow with all the indifference of an old campaigner, removed his shoes, and lay down quite contentedly.

"Call me in time for breakfast," he requested in a drowsy voice, and closed his eyes.

Corbyn was prompt to imitate him, and, as soon as O'Dare also had accommodated himself to circumstances, there was no more said.

It was not long before the other two men were slumbering peacefully, but the less fortunate O'Dare could not achieve a like result. There seemed to be nothing but knots in the particular planks he had unwillingly chosen for a couch, and a constant turning over only induced a fresh crop.

"This is most cursedly uncomfortable!" he said crossly to himself after an endless hour of it, and sat up, shivering, to rearrange his coverings.

The sound of shuffling footsteps on the stairway caught his attention and he leaned forward, elbows on knees, to listen.

CHAPTER II

BEATRIX

THE other two were sleeping very tranquilly, heads buried beneath their blankets. A mouse which scuttled along the wainscot seemed to make much unnecessary noise, and O'Dare, considering attentively the echoes from below, felt cold and lonely as these became more audible.

There was more than one person ascending. There were two: two men. There were more than two; but the third was not necessarily a man. There were no more than three, all told.

"Two men and a woman," he deduced ingeniously, "with rather more supper than they can conveniently carry on an even keel. They're not very conversational: I wish they'd say something."

His wish was not granted, however; and the footsteps halted, so that there was funereal stillness for a space. The ticking of his watch was like the blows of a trip-hammer. He could hear his heart beat.

"They've reached the floor below," he calculated. "A festive sort of owl our Italian friend!"

Suspensions of a silent scuffle reached his straining ears, and then the nearer impression of slow but steadier climbing. There were only two pairs of feet now, and they seemed disproportionately heavier.

"They're sober enough," thought the listener.

At the top of the stair they stopped again, and he heard a hoarse whisper. Some one came forward, and, having stealthily turned the handle of the locked door behind which he was cowering, retired, "apparently satisfied, to insert a key in that adjoining.

A match was struck, a gas-burner lit, and then three people entered the studio of J. Gonzalez: O'Dare believed that one of them had done so under some compulsion, although without spoken protest.

He did not quite know what to do next. It would not have been wise to wake the others, lest by some startled exclamation they should apprise the enemy of their presence. He did not feel like lying down again and letting ill alone.

He had no wish to interfere in what did not concern him, but — "I'll sit up for a while and see what happens," he resolved, and rubbed his eyes as there shot a ray of light from a crack in the plaster of the partition facing him. Then he rose cautiously, and, creeping towards it in his stocking-soles, peered through.

The adjacent room was little larger than a cup-

board and could boast no windows. Its walls were bare. There was no carpet on the floor. The furniture consisted of a single arm-chair.

Beyond it through an open door was a more commodious chamber, but almost empty also, in so far as O'Dare could judge.

It was Gonzalez who had lit the gas. He was bareheaded, but wore a fur-lined greatcoat, the upturned collar of which covered half his face. He glanced about him and then upwards before inviting his companions in.

"You must have been mistaken, Schweitzer," O'Dare heard him mutter. "There's no sign of any trespass, and, as you know, the studio opposite is already empty. I saw to that. The lumber-room's locked. I think we're quite safe from outside interference."

"There are fresh foot-prints on the stair since I went out," answered a sullen voice from the next room, "and ——"

"Oh, cease your croaking!" cried Gonzalez irritably. "The janitor no doubt came up to make the other door fast.

"Come this way, señorita, if you please. Pardon the poverty of my apartment, but, after all, it may serve well enough for waiting-room."

A woman appeared in the doorway, a young woman, almost a girl, and, pausing for an instant on the threshold to look about her, came bravely forward.

Her hands were bound behind her, her lips sealed by a silken handkerchief, but the bandage with which they had also blinded her had been loosened from about her eyes; and these spoke of overwhelming anger.

She crossed to the chair, and sat down. It seemed to O'Dare, looking on, that she did not stand in any awe of her captors.

Gonzalez gave way before her, and she was followed by a lean, dwarf-like, dried-up mannikin of furtive mien and most unpleasant personality: "A dangerous little divil that!" said Dennis O'Dare to himself.

"You see, señorita," the former remarked with a wave of the hand, "that it will be quite useless to attempt escape. We are alone here, at the top of an empty house.

"If you will grant me your solemn promise not to cause any disturbance, I shall be glad to remove the gag you have forced me to employ. Please nod if you agree."

She appeared to consider for a moment, and then accepted his condition with a haughty inclination. He stepped behind her, unloosed her remaining bonds, and came forward again.

"I trust you absolutely," he reminded her, and braced himself to meet the storm of her displeasure.

She did not speak at once, but, when she did, he shrank away with an uneasy movement.

"There is that between us now, Gonzalez," she

said, in a quiet, level voice, as if addressing a delinquent servant, "which will one day be wiped out very thoroughly—and you with it."

The veiled threat was brief, but served its purpose better than more voluble denunciation.

She looked past him at his companion, but did not deign to address that evil-doer. Her count was with the chief criminal: with his accomplices she need not now concern herself.

"May I remind the señorita that I am acting under instructions from His Excellency," Gonzalez ventured in a propitiatory tone, "and that," he added more malignantly, "she came here without ——"

"You trapped me very cleverly," she interrupted, and her eyes flashed again. "That also I shall not forget."

"I could think of no other way," he answered deprecatingly. "His Excellency's orders were most stringent, and, had I failed, I should have incurred heavy penalty. The señorita knows that I serve a hard task-master. It is with him that she should cast accounts—not with his servants."

"Enough," she said. "Please leave me, if you will."

He bowed obediently, desirous to propitiate her. "I trust you," he repeated, "since you have pledged your word."

"Step outside, Schweitzer."

His underling obeyed, but he himself still lingered. O'Dare judged that he was anxious to make his peace with her.

"The story of the accident was false," he said. "It was part of our plan. The señorita's friend is safe and well, so far as I know."

She took no notice of the information.

"I trust you, Doña Beatriz," he once more reminded her impressively, and shut her in, alone. Then her eyes brightened with relief, not altogether due to his withdrawal. His news had evidently been of much more import to her than she was willing to admit to him.

She rose, that she might reach more easily the pocket of her expensively simple gown, but her hand came out of it empty. She swept her skirts to one side with a silken swish, and looked down as if in search of something she might have dropped. There was nothing upon the floor but a pair of small feet trimly shod in patent leather. She sank back into her seat with an expression of puzzled disappointment, and sat still, thinking, one elbow on an arm of the chair, chin on palm. O'Dare gazed at her as though she had bewitched him.

Her young beauty was sufficient excuse.

She was fair, of the north, whose snowdrops and roses had lent her pure face their most tender tints. Her troubled eyes were of misty blue, underneath long lashes. The curve of the crimson cupid's-bow that her lips made, compressed as they were, would have drawn an anchorite from his desert, and yet the aptest description that Dennis O'Dare could supply from a memory well stocked with such

quotations was the old one of "sweet, cold, chaste lips, a mouth that had not yet dreamed of kisses, most honest eyes."

And her hair,

"Hair, such a wonder of flax and floss,
Freshness and fragrance—floods of it, too!"

her hair was loose under her broad, black hat. A curl as thick as his wrist flowed distractingly past the blue bow beneath a chin curved to that true oval which artists love but so seldom see. She was so unconsciously lovely in her abandon that sudden compunction for his espial smote the enraptured Dennis. He blushed in the darkness, bethought himself of how he might serve her.

"I must have a word with her before I wake those Rip van Winkles," he told himself, only half repentant, and, putting his lips to the opening, he whistled softly.

She did not seem to hear. He tried again, a little louder, and, looking through, saw her scanning the blank wall with anxious glance.

He made a megaphone of his two hands, and, "I'm a friend," he whispered sibilantly.

She overcame her startled impulse to call out, and turned one shell-like ear towards the spot behind which he was standing.

"Draw your chair closer so that I can speak to you," he begged, but she did not at once comply. She rose instead, and took a turn or two about her cell.

A light knock sounded on the door. "Come in," she said indifferently. It was partly opened and Gonzalez' face appeared.

"The señorita is restless," he remarked suspiciously, and she stopped short.

"Must I sit still?" she asked with assumed petulance, and, pushing her chair back to the wall, sank into it again while O'Dare grinned delightedly in the darkness.

"She's wise," he told himself.

The brown wig disappeared, the door was shut. She leaned back against the cracked plaster with a gesture of weariness, and put a hand to her lips lest any one should see them move.

"Who are you?" she inquired eagerly.

"My name is O'Dare," explained that gentleman. "Dennis O'Dare. Is there anything I can do for you? There are three of us in here, and we're more than a match for ——"

"Are the other two listening?" she interrupted.

"They're sound asleep."

"Please, please, don't wake them," she implored, "and promise me that you will tell them nothing of —— How long have you been watching?"

"I've seen the whole show."

"You won't disclose what you've seen, then, will you? I ask it as a great favour.

"Apart from that there's nothing you can do for me, unless ——" She paused reflectively. "If you would care ——"

"Of course I'd care," the impetuous Irishman assured her gallantly.

"I came here under a misapprehension, and the two men you saw seized me as soon as I entered the door downstairs, and—I've lost a letter I had with me. I don't want them or any one else to get hold of it. I must have dropped it just at the door. Do you think you could find it for me—without letting any one know?"

Dennis hesitated, and was lost.

"I'll find it for you," he asserted positively, and had his reward in a shy glance of gratitude from two entrancing eyes.

"I'll find it for you, and I'll fetch a policeman up at the same time. I'll have those two arrested so neatly that they'll scarcely notice ——"

"Oh, no! Please, no," she urged desperately. "You mustn't do that. I'm in no danger and—you promised me. You mustn't say a word of what you've seen to any one at all. It's to avoid such needless scandal that I've submitted to so much, and—you won't betray me, will you?"

Her swift, appealing look was too much for O'Dare. He did not understand, but he was altogether at her service.

"I'll carry out your orders," he assured her. "I'm off. If those two in front make any move toward my friends in here, will you make noise enough to wake them? I'll have to leave the door unlocked."

"I'll warn them in time," she assented. "I'll sit here till you return. You won't be long?"

"Trust me for that," he finished. "I'll be back before ——"

He felt his way along the wall as far as the door, found the key where Corbyn had laid it, and achieved a stealthy egress. From within the studio of J. Gonzalez sounded gruff voices, but otherwise all was still. He crept downstairs, and, when a step creaked, stopped to listen fearfully but without result.

There were no lights on the lower landings; the hallway was black and dark. He went on blindly, toward the door, feeling for a match, his head too full of the grateful glance the girl had given him to hold any doubts as to the wisdom of his enterprise, and hoping for at least a single smile when he should have accomplished his errand.

"I would my name were Benedick since hers is ——" he was muttering, when his romantic musings were abruptly put an end to. A blanket-like covering descended upon his head, so muffling it that he could not cry out, his arms were pinioned from behind, his ankles held fast in a vise-like grip. When he at last got his mouth open wide enough to howl for help, his outcry all but deafened himself and did not disturb his captors.

They bound him with convenient cords, and, lifting him bodily, carried him back upstairs, treating him none too tenderly by the way: but

he was able to check their course as far as Gonzalez' door, within which he was conveyed and quietly deposited on the floor. He could hear the soft thud-thud of several feet but nothing else, until rough hands removed in part the wrap about his shoulders, thrust a rude gag between his teeth, and, finally, uncovered his face.

Looking irately upwards his eyes met those of Gonzalez, who was inspecting him with a blankly puzzled expression. Schweitzer stood at one side, head poised, very like a serpent about to strike. Opposite him there was a group whose faces O'Dare could not recall, but none of them impressed him favourably. "Black Hands," was his mental summary of their most probable profession.

They seemed to be discussing him unfavourably also, but in low whispers and in a language which he did not understand; suddenly Gonzalez gave some order and all but he and Schweitzer left the room.

The two took hold of their prisoner and flung him to one side under a table, out of sight. To hide him more completely they drew down a corner of the cloth which covered it.

He lay there helpless while Gonzalez once more knocked and entered the inner chamber. The girl within came forth reluctantly. Her gaoler turned the gas out, followed her, and locked the door.

"The se nora's carriage waits," he said. "If she will swear to keep the strictest silence by the way there will be no need to use this; but other-

wise —— ” He held up the silk handkerchief and pointed to the rug which had already served to silence O'Dare. She flushed up hotly.

“See that you do not try my patience too far,” she said, and there was that in her tone which cowed him. But he was dogged in his determination to run no risk.

“The señorita will go with us—quietly?” he demanded.

“I will go with you quietly,” she replied.

He held the door for her, and she passed out with a reluctant backward glance. Two of the men there led the way downstairs: Gonzalez followed at her heels. No ghosts could have moved more noiselessly.

Schweitzer turned hurriedly to the table and took from one of his pockets a tiny phial. He held it up to the light which showed it full of a thick, colourless liquid. He shook it, and it clouded over.

He tiptoed to the door and called in the remainder of Gonzalez' men, who, at a word from him, took hold of O'Dare and lifted him from his corner.

One of them gripped him cruelly by the throat, another loosed the gag, and Schweitzer deftly emptied the contents of the phial into his open mouth. He could not cry out, was quite powerless, and, as the pressure upon his windpipe relaxed for a short second, he swallowed wildly the sweet, sickly potion.

He suffered all the pains of purgatory for a space while they stood watching him indifferently. A

bluish pallor overspread his features, his jaws relaxed, his head drooped limply to one side. A quick, convulsive shudder shook him from head to foot, and after that his straining limbs were still.

“Untie him,” Schweitzer ordered abruptly. “He’s safe enough now, and we’re to take him along with us.”

CHAPTER III

THE LANGUAGE OF FLOWERS

A RAY of wintry sunshine, streaming through the skylight overhead, fell full on Corbyn's face and woke him more effectually than any alarm clock would. He sat up blinking and looked about him.

Then he shook Allardyce out of sound sleep. "Where's Denny?" he demanded.

"Eh—yow-w-w?" answered Allardyce, yawning.

"Where's Denny?"

"Where's Denny?" Allardyce parroted stupidly.

"Why ——" He stumbled to his feet and stared at his companion. "Why ——"

They stood there gazing at each other.

"He's gone!" cried Allardyce.

"That's evident," Corbyn retorted somewhat crossly.

"I wouldn't have believed it," said the Englishman.

"Nor I," the American agreed. "I don't believe it either. Something has happened him. He wouldn't bolt without a word to us."

"The door's unlocked," whispered the other after assuring himself of the fact. "What the devil does it all mean?"

He looked blankly at Corbyn again. Corbyn looked back at him. They were both dumfounded by their friend's defection.

"What the devil does it all mean?" he once more ejaculated and drew out his watch. "It's half past seven too. Time to strike camp if we don't want to be caught here."

"Yes, we'd better get a move on," Corbyn assented. "I've shaving tackle somewhere about, and we can snatch a wash at the tap outside. We'll have to breakfast on water also unless our moneyed member returns to the fold in time."

They made a hasty toilet without further conversation, and, ten minutes later, left their temporary quarters, Allardyce no less neat and correct than usual, Corbyn equally well groomed.

A sudden inspiration caused Corbyn to stop at Gonzalez' door as they passed it. "I'll knock and ask if any one's been inquiring for me," he explained in a low tone. "He'll think we've come up from the street, and we'll find out if he's at home." But all his knocking elicited no response. The studio seemed to be deserted. On his way out he looked into his letter-box, for the last time. It was quite empty.

He followed his friend with a sigh, and for two long hours they paced the pavements, discussing O'Dare's most mysterious disappearance. With that to occupy their minds they did not miss the morning meal. But when, toward ten o'clock,

they turned along Fifth Avenue to the Hotel, they were no nearer any satisfactory conclusion as to its cause. The only decision they could arrive at was that, all things considered, it would not be advisable to raise any hue and cry for the missing man.

"No sign of him here," said Corbyn disappointedly as they went down the corridor together. "I thought he might perhaps turn up at ten, since he knew where to find us."

"I wish he had," answered Allardyce. "However, we'll hear what our good friend Rose has to say in the mean time, and then we'll be free to find Denny if he's to be found."

The spacious vestibule was thronged. They passed observantly from group to group, seeking some sign whereby they might identify the object of their quest.

"We'd better look out for him first, as instructed," observed Allardyce. "If we can't find him otherwise, we'll have to ask at the office, but ——"

"Gad!" exclaimed Corbyn. "If that isn't—— Of course it is! Excuse me a moment, Allardyce."

His friend followed him with his eyes to where a man was standing by himself, his back against a pillar, scanning the passers-by without apparent curiosity. A man of slightly less than middle height, but very straight and well set up.

His irregular features, impressed with a blandly whimsical melancholy, seemed in some degree familiar to Allardyce. who started as he observed

that the stranger was idly twirling a red rose between two fingers.

Corbyn bore down upon him with outstretched hand. "Hullo, Meggs!" he cried with all the fervour that can be compressed into that abrupt Anglo-Saxon apostrophe.

The other's outward gravity gave place to an instantaneous and whole-hearted grin of pleasure. He started forward, gripping the hand held out to him with such intensity of welcome that Corbyn winced.

"Great Cæsar's ghost!" he ejaculated. "Phil Corbyn—of all people! Where under heaven did you drop from? What are you doing here? Tell me all your news. It must be three years since we've met, and I'm not going to let you go till I've heard the last of it. You'll stop and breakfast with me. I'm hungry for some one to talk to, and, say! Phil. If you're open for a sporting event, I've a proposition to — Give me five minutes more here and we'll go inside. Then I'll explain."

Corbyn laughed, no less pleased than he over their chance encounter.

"I've a friend with me," he said doubtfully, "and — what are you twiddling that rose for, Jerry? This isn't the Martha Washington."

Mr. Meggs groaned lugubriously.

"Phil," he answered with great solemnity, "I'm broken-hearted. I'll tell you why, presently. The beautiful language of flowers I'm using in the for-

lorn hope of finding even one man with enough sense to see past his own nose, and because I couldn't contrive any better scheme. I'm not half brainy enough myself. That's what's the matter with me."

"You've found two right away, all the same," returned Corbyn contentedly, and signalled to Allardyce that he should join them.

"This is Ainslie Allardyce, Englishman, Jerry, and he's the first. I'm the other. Allardyce, this is Gerald Meggs."

"The polo-player?" said Allardyce as they shook hands. "Thought I knew your face. You dined with our mess at Woolwich one night a good many years ago after a hard game. Met you there, but I don't suppose you remember me."

"This is *the* top note!" Meggs declared in an ecstasy of satisfaction. "Of course I remember you. I've got the mark of your stick on my shin-bone yet to keep me from forgetting you. I never enjoyed a game more. And it's a godsend to me to see you both here. Come in to breakfast and I'll tell you all about everything. You haven't fed yet, have you?"

"How about that rose?" Allardyce asked in turn.

"That's what we're going to talk about," Meggs replied. "I'm from Barr of Mobile. But the rose is my own idea."

They found a secluded corner in the breakfast room, and, over the lavish repast he ordered, ar-

rived by degrees at a mutual understanding. They could all trust each other without preliminary inquiries. Corbyn had been on intimate terms with their gratified host since they had been school-boys together, and could therefore vouch for each of the others. But that was unnecessary, since Allardyce had been in the British army, and Meggs had met him at his own mess. A perfect understanding prevailed.

"What's driven you into the revolutionist business, Jerry?" demanded Corbyn as they sat down. "You surely haven't got through all your money since I saw you last!"

"The money still keeps coming in faster than I can spend it," Meggs declared dismally, and hesitated for a moment. "I'm broken-hearted, Phil. That's what's the matter with me, and I may as well tell you frankly, since it's the sole and sufficient excuse for the tangle I've got myself into. I fell in with the dream of my life last time I was in London, and—she turned me down. It's no laughing matter either, confound you! You'd feel very sorry for me if you'd seen her. Barr of Mobile means business, too, and but for her I wouldn't be mixed up with him."

"What's his game?" Allardyce inquired, very busy with bacon and eggs.

"There you have me. It's a surprise packet for somebody. I met him in New Orleans—when I left London I ran up and down the world like a dog

with a tin can tied to its tail—and, as soon as he had sized me up, he talked to me so cunningly that I consented to run this show for him. I was feeling pretty cheap at the time, and of course I jumped at the chance of a little healthy excitement. I'd be jumping still, I suppose, if I hadn't found out a thing or two about the same Barr. He's one of those exported Scotchmen who leave their consciences behind them in the old country, and they're about the most dangerous devils I know.

"All he'd tell me was that it will be a risky venture. If we get nipped by the way, there won't be much chance for us. It's outside civilisation, you know, and we leave the Stars and Stripes behind when we sail. I'm to take twenty men down to San Benito, under sealed orders, when he says, 'Go!' and act on these orders when I get there. That's his side of the question, and I signed."

"It sounds interesting," Allardyce commented, and helped himself to more coffee.

"They're having the time of their lives scrapping with each other in San Benito at this identical moment," continued Meggs. "But that doesn't mean that we're going to liberate any oppressed republics. No, sir. I made Barr swear by all he holds holy that we're to have nothing whatever to do with any of their private dog-fights. Ours is one of those high-class side-shows which are warranted not to bring a blush to the cheek of innocence. If we end up with our backs against a brick wall and bandages

over our eyes, it won't be because we've mistaken our mission in life to that extent. And the only weak point in the whole programme is that old Barr is a most monumental liar."

"But can't you find out ——" Corbyn interrupted, and Meggs held up a protesting hand.

"Half a minute, Phil," he requested. "Let me get it all off my chest in one spasm. What do you think I'm chasing about New York with a blush-rose in my hand for, anyhow! I've been working my mind double shifts of late. That's what's the matter with me. And what I've decided to do is to lay a sheet-anchor to windward of my slippery friend while the fair weather lasts. I'm willing to go there blind myself, but I am not going to throw away twenty other men's lives to no purpose. I'll tell you what my idea is. I'm going to form a syndicate to insure us all a square deal.

"Now, how are you fellows fixed? Will you come in with me?"

"I'll take five cards," said Allardyce casually. "My present hand isn't good enough to go on with."

Corbyn merely nodded, and Meggs whistled in great glee. A waiter came forward in haste. He sent the man off for cigars, and resumed in a quieter key.

"There's a boat sails for La Boca this afternoon. How would it suit you to drift into San Benito on her and find out how the land lies? Then if there's any hankey-pankey on tap we'll be able to turn the

tables on Barr before it's too late. It will be if we have to cross the mountains without knowing where we're at."

"We're your men, Jerry," Corbyn said briefly, after a quick, interrogative glance in the direction of Allardyce. "Nothing would suit us better, and I've been in San Benito before, too. I know La Boca slightly, and also Alta Cruz, the capital."

Meggs sat back, almost overcome by emotions of joy.

"What a combination!" he cried. "Phil, my rose was an inspiration."

"There's another man we might get to join us," suggested Corbyn, still hoping that Dennis O'Dare would turn up in time. "Would three be too many in the advance-guard?"

"I'll leave that to you," Meggs rejoined without thinking twice, "and remember expense is no object. I'll give you a cheque in advance for any amount you like. No, it's not my own money, for I made Barr cash up handsomely in advance and I have an absolutely free hand. I told him I'd take what steps I thought fit to insure our safety, and, of course, he couldn't raise any objection to that.

"Don't forget either that, if we ever get back, the Northern Corporation will honour our pay-drafts. I haven't trusted to luck in that respect. No, I wouldn't take Barr's word for a paper of pins.

"You'll start to-day, then, and I'll be after you with twenty of the bravest and best the minute he

slips the leash. I only wish I were going with you, but it won't be long till we join forces. Wait half a minute."

He left the table, and shortly came back with a slip of grey-green paper which Corbyn pocketed as Allardyce flicked it across to him. Having lit cigars, they turned to other topics. All three were well accustomed to act on few words, and the more salient features of Meggs' sketchy programme were quite sufficient for the other two. Their part at present was that of scouts in an enemy's country, and they found no occasion for further question as to such simple duty.

Allardyce spoke lightly of his wanderings since he had left the English army with some vague idea of earning his bread and butter by means of the pen in place of the sword. Corbyn explained straightforwardly his own anomalous position as a poor artist and the son of a rich man who did not believe in artistic idleness. Meggs entertained them both with London gossip, but did not again refer to his reason for leaving that city.

"I met your sister one day at Hurlingham, Phil," he remarked, and Corbyn's face lit up.

"Where is Doll at present?" he asked eagerly. "I had to tell her not to write me till Dad cools off, in case he should quarrel with her about me."

"She and her husband should be here in New York very shortly," Meggs told him. "They are coming over in their own boat, and intend to stay

on this side for some months. Landguard has resigned from the army. She made him. And he's a bit restless, with nothing to do. What corps was he in, do you know, Allardyce?"

"Landguard was in the Gunners, same as myself," Allardyce answered. "I didn't know his wife was your sister, Corbyn, old chap! I've never met her, but I used to know Landguard well. He's a good sort, too. He would have been in this with us like a shot, if he had had the chance and were still a bachelor."

"Yes, Landguard's all right," said Corbyn, and rose. "Come on, Allardyce. It's time we began to get busy, if we're to sail in the afternoon."

They parted with Meggs after a few final words as to future arrangements, and left him, greatly delighted with the success of his scheme, to the task of recruiting a few of his rank and file from among the many who had written Barr of Mobile. Allardyce beamed on Corbyn as they bowled smoothly down Broadway in the hansom they had hailed.

"Luck has turned at last, old chap," said he in a tone of great contentment. "And what a difference it makes having Meggs to deal with instead of some Spanish cut-throat as we expected. I'm rather surprised, all the same, to find him playing at soldiers of fortune."

"Poor Jerry!" Corbyn rejoined soberly. "He's harder hit than you'd think, Allardyce, whoever the girl was. He doesn't squeal, but he's feeling

it very badly. I can't understand—— He has more than enough money to make him a catch, and yet he gets turned down too."

"The ways of women are past finding out," Allardyce interrupted briskly, and Corbyn did not contradict him.

They spent a busy forenoon winding up the threads of their own affairs and spinning fresh ones for the future. The booking-clerk at the office of the Golden Cross Line had bidden them be on board their steamer, the *Hilario*, by four, but they found time to seek O'Dare in all his usual haunts before that hour, and, in the end, reluctantly came to the conclusion that they must count him out of their plans.

Another disappointment was in store for them when they drew up, on their way to the dock, in front of Fifi Florian's modest lodging.

The woman there informed them that the girl had given up her room that morning, and Corbyn's added inquiries only elicited the sulky supposition that she had perhaps found work in some other quarter of the city.

"That must be it," he said more hopefully, and, having left word for her, in case she should return, that she would hear of something to her advantage by calling at their bankers, they went on.

"We've done the best we can for her and Denny," Corbyn assured himself. "I only wish we could have found them both."

When they got to the pier from which the G. C. boats start once a fortnight for La Boca it was already in a state of ferment. They gathered from the sulphurous conversation of truckmen and stevedores that a consignment of cargo which ought to have been on board the day before had been kept back till the last minute, greatly to the hardship of those who had now to handle it.

"They must be a musical lot in San Benito!" said Allardyce laughingly, and pointed to a solid square of packing-cases all bearing labels which announced that they contained pianos and must therefore be treated tenderly.

"Who's that chap watching us so closely?" he whispered. "Keep still for a moment and then look round."

His friend obeyed him. "Why, it's my worthy friend Gonzalez," he answered. "And what a sight!"

It was the individual in question, but so disguised that it would have been difficult to swear to his identity. He was wearing a great fur-lined overcoat, his head was bandaged in a black scarf, he had a soft hat pulled well down over his face, and spectacles upon his nose: but for the tell-tale wig which showed between the brim of his hat and his up-turned coat collar he would scarcely have been recognisable.

"I'll have a word with him," said Corbyn impulsively. "He may know something of Dennis O'Dare."

He hurried forward, but the fur-lined coat became at once invisible; nor could he find it anywhere about the pier. He came back disconcertedly, and followed his friend up the gangway.

A sulky steward showed them to their berths within a dingy stateroom on one side of the old-fashioned poop cabin, and, after they had bestowed their scanty belongings in such wise as to discourage intrusion, they went on deck again, to kick their heels there until dinner-time.

Few of their fellow-passengers appeared at that function, and such as there were did not impress them favourably. They turned in early to escape the chaos reigning high and low on the *Hilario*, and heard but dimly the hoarse blast from her steam siren which proclaimed the hour of her departure, two A. M.

The Golden Cross Line was a government concern, the property of the Republic of San Benito, and, needless to say, it paid no dividends. In its case might was right regarding any ready cash that came into its coffers; the hapless folk who parted with good money for their passages by one or other of its ancient vessels received considerably less attention on them than did the unfailing "deadheads."

"They treat us like a lot of stowaways!" said Allardyce disgustedly as he and Corbyn paced the poop together after breakfast, watching the land lie down below the quarter-rail. "Somehow I don't think that we're going to enjoy this trip, old chap."

"I shall be thankful if we get there safely," Corbyn answered. "It will be less amusing still if it comes on to blow. I've never seen a shadier-looking lot of navigators outside Sheepshead Bay. The skipper jars me worse than a dentist's drill!"

"I don't half like the looks of our cabin-companions either," added the Englishman. "The crowd that buzzed on board after we went to bed comes from the Bad Lands or I'm a double-Dutchman. I don't mind betting that there will be trouble stirring when they get ashore."

The atmosphere on the *Hilario*, seemed, indeed, to be one of mutual distrust and suspicion. No one had a good word to say to the two English-speaking passengers, and, when they happened to approach one or another of the whispering groups which were forever forming, it would melt away, to coalesce again in a different corner. Wherefore they made no overture to any one, but passed the time in unbroken partnership.

The days were long and dull, but seven of them made a week, and on the Sunday afternoon they sighted San Tomás. By nightfall they had cleared the Islands, and were heading for the harbour of La Boca.

There was no wind. The tropic temperature was stifling. A most malodorous and all-pervading incense made life below unbearable.

Corbyn and Allardyce sought refuge from it in the shadow of the after wheel-house, and made their

minds up to remain on deck till dawn should bring a cooler hour or two.

They had smoked their final pipes, were nodding drowsily in their uncomfortable seats, when from amidships there broke forth a sudden uproar, and, while they rubbed their eyes, a struggling mob besieged the bridge and chart-house.

The whip-like crack of a revolver set them fumbling at their own belts and, as they drew the weapons there, was answered by another, and another. Some one laid hands upon the whistle-cord and set the siren screaming: another lit a blue-light, and its flare showed a dark mass of men swarming about the quarter-deck.

The officer on watch was standing with his hands above his head, and, while he waited helplessly, his fellows were brought forth and bundled up to the bridge beside him. The whistle-cord was cut, and heavy silence supervened.

The two men aft were too far off to interfere even if they had desired to do so. The tumult had died down before they could come to any understanding of the incident.

"It's mutiny!" said Corbyn as the noise ceased. "It's barratry," amended Allardyce. "Barratry on the high seas. Our sporting friends have seized the ship. The crew are quiet as mice."

The moon showed over the horizon, and its silver radiance cut a clear swathe across the gloom.

"Come inside," Corbyn whispered, and drew his

friend after him as he slipped cautiously into the tiny shelter at their backs.

"What are we going to do?" he demanded hastily. "Those fellows will probably disarm us if we let them. Do you think it would be safe ——"

Allardyce let the brass-railed window down and looked out.

"They're coming aft," he said. "We'll stand them off until we hear what's what."

They closed and bolted both the doors, and laid the muzzles of their Colts across the window-ledge commanding the two ladders which led from the main-deck to the poop.

None of the contingent which had started in their direction appeared. Part of them halted by the main-hatch and began to strip the tarpaulin from it: the others entered the saloon by the companion-hatch between the ladders.

"If we had rifles we could hold the fort till dooms-day," Allardyce said. "I'd love to —— Gad! They're getting a piano up!"

He grinned and Corbyn chuckled quietly as the great square case swung in its tackle and came crashing down on deck. They heard the splintering of wood, and Allardyce gave vent to an ejaculation of dismay.

"They'll play no love-songs upon those," he stated with great gravity. "They're full of guns."

They watched and waited for ten minutes longer

while from both ends of the ship came men who went away with arms.

"I've counted thirty," Corbyn asserted, "and—"

"Stand by!" snapped Allardyce. "They're after us.

"Halt there, sir! One step forward and I fire."

The head which had popped up above the topmost step of the starboard ladder popped down again with all celerity.

"They're on the poop-deck," cried a voice, and there ensued an unseen scramble.

"Do you know who spoke?" asked Corbyn of his ally; and, without pausing for reply, "It was Gonzalez," he said definitely.

Allardyce had not time to contradict him, even if he had felt inclined to do so, before there showed in front, under the full light the moon was now shedding, what looked like a white handkerchief tied to a rifle-barrel.

"One of you may come up," shouted the Englishman in easy Spanish. After much muttering and hesitation, there appeared the face of Gonzalez, but with black hair above it in place of brown.

"You won't shoot?" he asked nervously.

"Not unless we need to," answered Allardyce. "Tell your friends down below to stay there."

"What have you to say?"

"Will you surrender to the Red *Junta* of San Benito?"

"Why should we do so? We have nothing to

do with you and your Juntas, nor you with us. We're simply passengers on board this steamer."

More muttering, and afterwards, "They will use force if you defy them," said Gonzalez. "They offer you a fair trial ——"

"Fair trial for what?" demanded Allardyce indignantly. "Who do they think we are? They must be mad."

"You refuse?" The anxious face was slowly disappearing.

"Here, wait a minute! What ——"

"For the last time—Do you refuse?" The face had gone, and in its place there was a flash of light, a crash; a bullet bit the steel front of the wheel-house, and the spattering lead splashed back along the deck. A cackle of amusement came from the group below. It amused them to think that their ingenious emissary had got at least one shot in under the white flag.

"Above there! You two spies!" Gonzalez finished, from safe shelter. "We're going to shoot you at our leisure. It would have been a waste of time to try you, anyway."

CHAPTER IV

THE TIGER OF SAN BENITO

THERE were two carriages in waiting at the kerb when Joaquin Gonzales and his prisoner stepped out into the street. Into the first of these he handed the girl, and with her was driven off at a great pace in the direction of the river.

The second vehicle, into which Schweitzer and his underlings crowded above the body of O'Dare, started a little later and made slower progress.

A steam launch, lying alongside the pier at which each in due course drew up, had carried off the earlier arrivals before the others got there. They waited, cursing, until it came back, and then transferred to it the limp encumbrance from the conveyance, which clattered away at once.

"Let go," commanded Schweitzer, and drew a hand across his damp forehead as the boat-hooks fell and they sped downstream.

"*Sangre de dios!*" he said blasphemously, "but I'm glad to be afloat again. Gonzalez doesn't grudge a risk—when it does not affect his own safety." He shivered, and drew his great-coat more closely about him.

No one else spoke.

A short run with the current brought them abreast a long, low craft, lying at anchor in mid-river, with only riding-lights on view. The launch swung round her stern, came up again to port of her, and ran alongside with a clumsy bump. Dark figures on the deck above made fast the lines that were thrown them, and then the body was hauled on board the bigger craft in the bight of a rope. Schweitzer climbed up after it, and Gonzalez met him at the gangway. The launch cast off and dropped quietly away with the tide.

"Shall I slip this carrion overside?" asked Schweitzer eagerly, but his superior did not immediately reply.

"Wait till we're at sea," said that diplomat at length. "The people here set so much value on their carcasses that they might call us to account for it. We'll learn by precept rather than experience, Schweitzer: we're not so far away as was Raisuli."

"Where shall we stow it, then?"

"Oh, anywhere out of the way. You know the *Mariposa* well enough for that.

"And now I'm going to get some sleep: I have to be ashore again at eight. You'll stay on deck: you will have lots of rest to-morrow. There's nothing else for you to do then."

He turned on his heel and disappeared, leaving the other to his own devices. Schweitzer swore

wrathfully, but did not dare to disobey since it was necessary to have some one who could speak English on watch with the look-out men. And when the police patrol swept past a little later he hailed them cheerfully, holding some conversation with them ere they ran out of earshot.

Gonzalez came on deck again soon after dawn, and set forth early for Manhattan, from which he returned after some hours of absence.

"Where's the torpedo-gunner?" he demanded of the sentry who received him.

"The señor Schweitzer is in the magazine, señor," the man said sullenly.

Dennis O'Dare had suffered agonies of all sorts since he had started from the lumber-room upon his fatal errand. The fear that, through his folly, his two friends might suffer had been chief of these, and then there was his failure to make good upon the mission with which he had been entrusted. It made him frantic to imagine what the fair cause of all his anguish must think of him when he did not return to her after his glib assurances, while the impression Corbyn and Allardyce could scarcely help but form about his conduct was still more bitter to think about.

As soon as he understood that Schweitzer meant to poison him and so prevent his bearing witness against the gang he had so fortuitously disturbed at its nefarious work, it struck him that the balance of events was swinging more evenly. It was unpleasant

to be done away with in such rough and ready fashion, but, since that was part of the performance and he could not help himself, he must put up with it. In other words, he did not fear to face the finish. Dennis O'Dare was no coward.

The pangs of dissolution over, he felt optimistically curious. Once dead he had become reincarnated in an agreeably sunny corner, and, opening one eye cautiously lest he should have to endure fresh disappointment, he saw above him a white-painted ceiling.

Further inspection showed that it had suffered extreme heat: great flakes of paint had fallen from it. Dennis shook his head very disconsolately and became aware that he was afflicted with a headache: which proved, to his intense bewilderment, that he was still in the body corporate. He stretched his limbs and found that they were all complete, in working order.

"I don't believe I'm dead at all!" he muttered angrily, and on the instant there arose within his bosom a most burning resentment against Gonzalez and his evil crew. His senses had come back to him and he recalled with growing rage all the indignities that had been put upon him.

A sudden snore apprised him of the fact that he was not alone. He raised himself upon one elbow and caught sight of Schweitzer slumbering on a shelf almost within arm's length of where he lay. Peering about, he recognised the garniture of a small craft's

interior, and from the tubes upon their chocks in front deduced that she was a torpedo-boat.

"I've been shanghaied!" he said to himself with steadily rising wrath. "I'll kill that shark-faced devil as soon ——" He lay down hurriedly and shut both eyes as a step sounded on the deck above and some one clambered through the hatch beyond the open door.

"Schweitzer!" a voice cried, and O'Dare knew joy once more, for it was Gonzalez'. "Schweitzer—wake up, man! I have news for you."

His satellite responded to the shaking with which the words were emphasised by biting viciously at the hand which had disturbed him, and then sat up, scowling. "Ten thousand devils!" he exclaimed. "Oh, it's you, is it? I thought ——"

"Turn out," the other ordered sharply, "and attend. Gather your wits together. I've little time to spare and much to tell you." He closed the door behind him and became impressive in his speech.

"The revolutionary Junta's taken space on the *IIilario*," said he, "for a big lot of arms and ammunition; and all their fighting men here go with it."

Schweitzer's thin lips curled at the corners.

Gonzalez showed his teeth and seemed to smile.

"They'll seize the steamer south of San Tomás," the spy continued, "and their intention is to make a landing on the Lower Coast, where their friends

will be waiting them. The Reds are strongest in that district."

"How many war-heads have you, Schweitzer?"

"Sufficient to sink a fleet, if need be. Where will the *Mariposa* pick her up?"

"Somewhere among the Islands, but not before they've made their *coup*. I'm going with them, and I'll do my best to hasten matters. The signal will be one blue-light and a long blast on the steam-whistle."

"Remember, though, that there will be no opening for torpedo-practice until I'm safely back on board the *Mariposa*. Make no mistake on that point, *mi amigo*."

"I wouldn't think of such a thing!" Schweitzer assured him in an injured tone, but with eyes belying lips. "I won't pull trigger till we have her tied up in La Boca and you are once more with me."

"That's all, then," said Gonzalez. "I've given the *commandante* his sailing-orders. The *señorita's* settled, and—— Oh, yes. Her new companion will be on board as soon as the launch gets back. She seems to have found out that the woman she had has been tampering with her letters, and so dismissed her. I had to engage another in a great hurry. I don't think we'll get much out of her."

He spoke contemptuously, yawning, as he turned towards the door.

"The Junta meets for the last time at three," he finished; "I must be punctual, to escape suspicion."

He lingered still, and his glance fell on Dennis O'Dare, in his corner.

"I didn't notice," he said sharply, poking that individual in the short ribs with a painfully pointed shoe, "I didn't notice that thing."

"You'll notice this, then," snapped O'Dare, springing to his feet, his face aflame with fury; and, ere the bewildered couple confronting him could even imagine what had struck them, he had them in a heap on the steel floor, where he proceeded to deal justly by them after a crude but very effective fashion of his own.

Each time they rose he laid them low again with flail-like fists; they kicked and scratched each other in their blindness while he knocked their heads together. He did not disregard ring rules in spite of dire temptation, but otherwise set science aside and thrashed them thoroughly.

The sentry overhead heard the resounding uproar, but thought at first that Schweitzer and Gonzalez were engaged in argument. Then he risked reprimand by looking in, and, seeing the fracas, climbed down. He clubbed his carbine with felonious intent, and was about to smite the stranger from behind when two white hands caught the uplifted butt and a woman's voice cried, "Danger!"

O'Dare slipped from the tangle dexterously, and, arming himself with a heavy spanner from the tool-rack, backed against the forward bulkhead to draw

breath: Gonzalez and his ally staggered upright, and stood gasping.

"Must you do murder here before my eyes!" the girl demanded hotly, scanning Dennis for some clue to his identity, while he regarded her with the most grateful sensations.

"We are the murdered—not the murderers," Gonzalez answered, and his adversary laughed with heartfelt glee.

"Just say the word, Miss Beatrice," he begged, "and I'll complete the contract. We owe these two ——"

She started, realising, in the nick of time, that this must be her unseen friend of overnight, and, taking that for her cue, turned upon him with seeming anger. "I shall be forced to dismiss you, too, sir," she said sternly, "if I have any further fault to find with your behaviour."

He looked most blankly at her as Gonzalez asked, "Is this—this gentleman in your employment, *señorita*?"

"He is my private secretary—Mr. O'Dare," she made answer boldly, without hesitation, hoping that she was not mistaken in the deduction she had drawn.

Gonzalez' face fell as he saw all hope of revenge frustrated. He could not deny her statement, and would not dare to interfere with any member of her household.

"It's just as well—for him," he asserted darkly, "that he was brought on board. You will have

to find quarters for him, Schweitzer, and see that he has proper treatment. The *señorita* must have no cause for complaint, lest she should find herself unable to commend us to His Excellency.

"Now I must take leave. I shall not have the happiness of travelling to La Boca with you.

"Your most humble servant, *señorita*. Yours, *señor secretario*. Remember, Schweitzer. *Quedan Vds. con dios.*"

He bowed stiffly and left them, Schweitzer following. The other two were left together in the torpedo-magazine.

Dennis O'Dare awaited his new employer's pleasure, and presently she spoke. In the broad light of day he thought her even fairer than before. Her voice was an enchantment.

"How came you here?"

"They caught me at the stair-foot," he replied concisely, "and carried me upstairs again. And then they drugged me."

"I'm sorry," she said softly, "to have brought you into all this trouble. I found my letter, too, on the way out."

"The last half hour has made up for—any trifling inconvenience," he assured her.

"But this is only the beginning," she responded. "There was no way to save you from them but by claiming you—I know too well how little value human life has in their eyes—and now you will have to travel with me to La Boca."

"I'll travel round the world, if need be," he asserted recklessly, "although I'd like to let my friends know first ——"

"We are close prisoners," she told him. "There is no hope of getting word ashore. That's why I'm sorry."

A pause ensued. Then with a gesture of decision she continued:

"I had better tell you now that I am Beatriz Ybarra, half-cousin of the President of San Benito."

"Half-cousin of a precious scoundrel!" thought O'Dare rather ruefully, recalling what he had heard of that individual, "but, after all, there's a black sheep in most flocks."

"His Excellency sent for me, but I refused to go to him. He has used force in consequence, and, to save scandal, I submit. I do not fear him, and you need not while you are with me; but if they seek to separate us ——"

The sentry at the deck-hatch knocked upon the scuttle, and Gonzalez' voice called down: "Here is the lady, your companion, *señorita*. The launch waits, and, once more, *adios*."

"Come through into my sitting-room," she said to Dennis, leaving unsaid the finish of her former sentence.

The average torpedo-boat can boast no ladies'-cabin, but the *Mariposa* had been built to represent an entire navy and serve many purposes. Extensive preparations had been made on board for

the reception of His Excellency's cousin; the quarters in which she had been installed were wonderfully comfortable and commodious.

O'Dare sat down at a sign from her, but, as she turned to greet the stranger announced, he rose again in obvious astonishment.

A girl was standing in the doorway, dressed all in black but pretty as a picture even in such sombre garb, despite her pallor and the apprehension in her attitude.

"Fifi!" cried Dennis, and wondered if, after all, he could be dreaming.

She looked at him in blank bewilderment and then her face lit up.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you, Denny!" she said tremulously, using the only name by which she had known him in that strange new world to which her dead brother had introduced her, a world wherein good comradeship replaces ceremony. But before O'Dare could reply, her glance had met that of Beatriz, and, while he in turn looked on in amazement, they were clasped in each other's arms.

He turned away, and coughed, and blew his nose, as a man will when women show emotion, standing with eyes averted until they had in some degree recovered their composure. There were many questions to be asked and answered among the three of them. Fifi and Beatriz had first met in Vienna, before the former's family had fallen from its high estate there. The recollection of those happy days

in contrast with their present circumstances had brought quick tears to the eyes of both, but these soon passed. Neither was of the metal which spends itself in vain repining.

"But how did you come here?" Dennis O'Dare asked. All else had been cleared up between them and there was only that one point to be explained.

"I came in a steam launch," Fifi replied. "The gentleman who took the studio next door to Mr. Corbyn's engaged me as a companion to a lady going south for the winter in her yacht, and—here I am. I thought it wasn't very like a yacht at first, but now I understand.

"And, Denny, I want to thank you with all my heart for ——"

"Not a word—not a word more, Fifi," cried O'Dare, and backed out with uplifted hands, betaking himself to the torpedo-magazine, where he made himself quite at home in Schweitzer's quarters, there to think things over, and leaving the two girls at liberty to exchange further confidences between themselves.

"I'm so glad Denny is with us," said Fifi simply as the door closed behind him. "He's such a safe friend."

"Who is the Mr. Corbyn you spoke of, Fifi?" Beatriz asked in a low tone.

"An artist," Fifi answered. "Philip Corbyn. He was Stephan's best friend, and I can't tell you

how good he has been to us, Beatriz, poor and all as he is."

"But, surely," Beatriz objected, "he —— If it is the same Philip Corbyn I know, his father is a millionaire."

"Yes," said Fifi sadly. "But there was trouble between them—some girl his father wanted him to marry, and he would not. I was so sorry for him, and ——"

"Does he belong in San Francisco?"

"Yes, he has often spoken of his home there."

Beatriz pondered the matter for a few moments, a shadow on her fair forehead showing that she did not yet fully understand. But she knew that the struggling artist who out of his unaccustomed poverty had so effectually befriended the exiles was that same Philip Corbyn who——

"Fifi," she whispered with a quick, urgent craving for sympathy in her distress. "Phil Corbyn asked me a year ago to marry him, and I—I had to tell him to wait. I couldn't help that, but—I feel now that I've been the cause of his troubles. I—I've been to blame, but—I didn't know."

The *Mariposa* put to sea that night, attracting no undue attention, and made easy weather of the long Atlantic swell outside. Once free of unfriendly observation all restrictions upon the liberty of her three passengers were removed, and, although the deck-space was limited, they did not lack room either there or in their quarters below. Schweit-

zer and the ship's officers were berthed forward and the magazine had been allotted to the so-called secretary, Mr. O'Dare, whose self-imposed duty it now became to keep his employer and her companion in the best possible spirits.

In that direction he was not unsuccessful, his irresistible Irish humour making light of their sufficiently grave situation, and when he learned, as he did in due course, that Beatriz was interested in his good friend Corbyn, he did not find it difficult to entertain her. Fifi also had much that was good to say on behalf of her dead brother's closest intimate, while Dennis found means to keep her, too, from brooding upon the dangers ahead. His solicitude on their behalf left himself little time to anticipate evil, and since he was but human it was scarcely to be wondered at that he could even enjoy his present predicament.

The days were uneventful, and time passed not unpleasantly, no one molesting them, until one afternoon, among a group of lovely islands in the Carribean, they were aware of an unusual bustle on the bridge; and, shortly afterward, a quartermaster came to them with the polite request that they should go below.

It would have been futile to object and they obeyed with a good grace. The sentry was replaced at their companion-hatch and they were once more under close confinement.

"They must have picked up the *Hilario*," O'Dare told his two companions. "She left New York the

same night we did, and we've been dodging about these islands until she came up with us. We are travelling faster now, you notice."

A thrill ran through the slender hull within which they were seated and the dull thud of the propellers struck a higher note.

He did not deem it desirable to tell them what he had heard pass between Gonzalez and Schweitzer as to the purpose of the pursuit in progress. There would be time enough for that when it was absolutely necessary.

They dined in due course, and the evening passed as usual save that they felt their imprisonment after liberty and it was very sultry under deck. Word had been brought them that they might expect to reach La Boca before morning, but they were disinclined to separate since sleep was patently impossible in that close atmosphere.

Soon after dark the rhythm underfoot slowed down, they heard the sound of hurrying feet close overhead, the clank of chains on the steel deck, the creak of rusty hinges.

"They're opening the torpedo-magazine," O'Dare told himself, but did not impart this surmise to the others.

The engines stopped, for the first time since they had left the Hudson River, and on the silence which ensued they heard the swish of water overside until a hoarse roar startled them and they half rose from their chairs.

"The captain is hailing some one through a megaphone," said Dennis somewhat shamefacedly and sat back again.

Listening intently he could make little of the loud-voiced conversation which ensued. It lasted five minutes, short and sharp on the part of those on board the *Mariposa*, defiant, hesitant, then suppliant and cringing as regarded the unseen answerer. When the propellers began to churn again Beatriz Ybarra gave vent to a long sigh of relief.

"It was the *Hilario*," she said slowly in response to O'Dare's mute glance of inquiry, "with men and arms and ammunition to be used against the government of San Benito. They threatened to torpedo her without a moment's mercy unless she changed her course and headed for La Boca. They will escort her in: it isn't far now."

It was but three short hours, in fact, and they were thankful, when the anchor-cable clanked out through the hawse-pipe, that nothing had happened in the interim.

Coincidentally with that welcome sound they heard a tender steam alongside, and a few minutes later there appeared at the entrance to the cabin in which they were waiting a slight, dark, aristocratic-looking man of medium stature, who came forward hastily, knelt before Beatriz Ybarra, and kissed her hand.

"Welcome back, cousin and queen of my heart," he said in Spanish. "I say so for myself and San Benito."

"A patriot would put his country first, Ygnacio," she responded coldly. "In any case—you sent for me and I am here."

"Why did you seek to escape me?" he asked in tender reproach. "You know ——"

"Wait till we have more privacy," she begged.

"Are these your people?" he asked with royal indifference. "The señorita Florian and señor O'Dare; I heard that they were with you. Send them on deck. I have so much to say to you."

She signed to them that they should go.

"That is President Ybarra," said Dennis as he escorted Fifi to a quiet corner of the deck. He's the Bogey Man of Central America. They call him the Tiger of San Benito."

"He has a cruel face," said Fifi soberly.

Schweitzer came shuffling through the gloom and her hand sought O'Dare's, who clasped it protectingly. He stopped at the gangway opposite and presently the sound of oars foretold the approach of further visitors. From underneath his coat he brought forth a dark lantern, slipped the slide once in signal and covered it again. O'Dare looked right and left, and saw that all deck-lamps had been extinguished; the skylights were closed down and covered with tarpaulins.

The lights ashore showed the *Hilario* lying to the south, a hulking silhouette against them; and outlined a cloaked figure at the *Mariposa's* rail. It was Gonzalez.

"What does His Excellency say?" he was demanding of the impatient Schweitzer. "I saw his launch pass. Has he come on board?"

"He's here," the mercenary answered, "and approves. We're to let go. He has insured the *Hilario* against war-risks and, as you know, money's scarce!"

"Is the tube laid?"

"It's ready to touch off."

Gonzalez grinned and rubbed his hands.

"Good! Very good!" said he. "There is one man especially on the *Hilario* of whom His Excellency will be glad to be well rid.

"We'll turn the search-light on her, and ——"

They hurried off together, and as O'Dare grasped the dire import of their most devilish scheme he felt a cold sickness creeping over him. What could he do alone against them! But he must try ——

"Wait here," he said to Fifi. "I've a word to ——"

He tiptoed after them until they separated, Gonzalez going to the bridge and Schweitzer forward. He followed Schweitzer until a hoarse order from behind brought down upon him many men who, after a brief struggle, overpowered him, holding him there until they should be told what was to be done with him.

As Schweitzer was about to launch the torpedo O'Dare spat at him for want of other weapon of offence. The little man made a bad shot, and, looking up, shook his fist, screaming, at the ag-

gressor. Then he shipped a fresh tube and Dennis was dragged away, still fighting like one possessed.

It would indeed have gone ill with him, for one of his captors, irritated by his stubborn resistance, would have struck him down with a cutlass, had not Fifi flown between them with a choking cry and shielded the helpless Dennis at the risk of her own life.

What happened afterwards was like an evil dream.

A long white lane of light was cloven through the darkness from the *Mariposa's* bridge, and, in the heart of it, lay the *Hilario*, broadside on, moored stem and stern so that she should not swing.

She staggered and sank sideways for a single instant as if smitten to the heart, and then became invisible. Where she had been there was a great, grey cloud of frothing water, a blinding flash of flame which vomited a myriad fragments and black, woolly smoke: a seething whirlpool full of fountains where the torn and broken débris fell.

A dull, ear-splitting crash was echoed and re-echoed by the mountain-face above La Boca.

CHAPTER V

A STRANGE TARGET PRACTICE.

JOAQUIN GONZALEZ, secret service agent of the President of San Benito, was disposed to take credit to himself for the manner in which he had carried out the important double mission whereon he had been despatched by his august employer. That had been, briefly, to bring or send, no matter by what means, His Excellency's wealthy cousin, the señorita doña Beatriz Ybarra to San Benito; and, by the way, to do as much harm as he might to those of the Red revolutionists who, it was understood, were active in New York.

He had reached New York only a few hours after Beatriz had arrived there from Europe. The dowager who had acted as her companion abroad had been one of his creatures, as Beatriz had found out too late. From her he had learned all that he needed to know concerning Corbyn, and the rest had been simple enough. A single bold coup had sufficed to carry the girl off, and she had shown no inclination to seek outside help against him. Corbyn had been got rid of without the least difficulty, and did not even know that his name had been used as a bait to entrap her.

With the revolutionists he had had equal success. They had admitted him, on his carefully forged credentials, to their most secret councils, and he had won their hearts by helping them headlong adown the path which must lead to their ultimate destruction, smoothing the rough places for them, egging them on to action, shepherding them to their fate with conscienceless skill. Another had mooted it, but his had been the brain which conceived for them the idea of seizing the *Hilario*, and when he had volunteered to sail with the ship even the most timid had felt that success was assured.

He had been absolutely astounded to see Corbyn at the steamer, and could not but believe that the young American had by some means found out about Beatriz's abduction. There could be no other explanation of his travelling to San Benito. Gonzalez secreted himself in his cabin, devoting deep thought to the problem of what should be done with the interloper. A quick solution presented itself. From his hiding-place he let it be known that he believed there were spies on board.

The fear of treachery is always present in a conspirator's mind, and what more natural than that his credulous dupes should suspect the unknown? Suspicion became certainty when, the steamer seized, all others overpowered, it proved that the perfidious foreigners alone had found refuge from them. Thanks to Gonzalez' agency, the revolutionists had met with no real opposition in their

first active effort, and their elation made them the more bellicose against the two defenceless strangers who had defied them. Gonzalez rubbed his hands in the shadow as he heard them breathing dire threats. It pleased him to see his plan running smoothly toward its foreseen conclusion. It would please his master to hear that Corbyn had been finally disposed of, and amuse him to hear how.

"They might afford us a target for some rifle-practice," said he, and the suggestion found instant favour.

His valiant brothers in arms were already pining for an opportunity to test their untried rifles without too much risk to themselves.

"We'll lay a light aft and fire from the bridge-deck," one suggested and the others acclaimed him a master-mind.

"They've only revolvers with them," he concluded with becoming modesty.

They ducked and ran, one at a time, for the more distant shelter, while Allardyce and Corbyn laughed at their precaution, but, when a cluster of electrics was carried abaft the engine-room skylight and trained on the after wheel-house, both became grave again: and when the first shot whistled past them their gravity gave place to sudden indignation.

"The swine! The low-down, dirty swine!" cried Corbyn as a second effort which showed better marksmanship was greeted with a chorus of approval

by its partisans. "They're going to bombard us at long range while we can't reach them. How far will your Colt carry, Allardyce?"

"As far as that light at any rate," answered the Englishman through set teeth. "We've got to douse it, old chap, or they'll douse us."

He fired, and missed; and was answered by a spattering volley. He fired again before the others could extract spent shells, and then stooped down to escape the ensuing shower of bullets.

"It's lucky this old hutch of ours is steel," he said, and filled the empty chambers of his magazine. "I'm not much of a shot, it seems, although I used to fancy myself at forty yards."

"The target is an uncommon one," Corbyn replied. "I'm going to draw their fire now and try my hand. You'd better stand by, in case there's any one about who thinks of stepping upstairs. If they were men they would rush us at once."

He thrust his hat above the window-ledge upon the handle of a deck-broom he had found behind him, and a hail of lead greeted its appearance. Then he looked out, took aim despite stray shots which followed, and, pulling with steady pressure at the trigger, scored a success. His shot smashed the white back-plate of the cluster and set it swaying wildly.

"Good man!" commented Allardyce. "One more like that and they'll need new illuminations for their shooting gallery. I'll rake them with a

quick-fire —— Gad! Get loaded quickly—here they come!”

He aimed at the first of the dark shadows creeping towards them below the bulwarks under cover of a continuous flash and crackle from the bridge-deck. Their stubborn resistance had already enraged the riflemen, and their position was to be carried by assault. Whereafter there would be short shrift for both of them.

“Wait till they top the ladders,” Corbyn cried, and was filling his mouth with cartridges when “Sail ho!” shrieked a terrified voice from forward. “See the torpedo-boat coming up astern!”

No thunderbolt could have produced among them a more profound sensation of disaster. The firing ceased, the light was turned off, and the storming-party fled back to the bridge-deck.

Corbyn caught Allardyce’s eye and they smiled somewhat sickly at each other. In such short space of time the nervous tension had been high.

They waited quietly where they were, and heard what passed between their would-be executioners and those on board the craft which presently caught up with the *Hilario*. Thereafter they were left in peace, and no one seemed to think it worth while to hold further parley with them.

The sudden surprise of capture had thoroughly cowed the revolutionists and they made no demur when, having dropped anchor off La Boca, a boarding-party from the *Mariposa* bade

them lay down their arms and drove them below with blows.

It was too late, after they had been battened under hatches, to bewail the absence from among them of their comrade Gonzalez, but notwithstanding they did bewail it very volubly, conceiving themselves betrayed.

The couple in the wheelhouse had come forth tentatively, but, when they saw the sort of treatment being meted out to their unfortunate fellow-passengers, they deemed it more judicious to postpone all explanation of their own presence on board for the time being. They knew that mere assertions would go for little in the darkness, and decided to wait for day-light to prove their identity as neutrals.

It seemed to them quite providential that Gonzalez should ignore them as he did, and, when that scoundrel clambered down into the boat which was to carry him and his assistants into safety, they congratulated themselves on his short memory.

"There *was* a spy on board, you see," said Allardyce, "and there he goes. The others are all prisoners below. The deck is deserted. Let's see if we can swing a boat out-board and cut ashore."

They scrambled forward and set hastily to work, but scarcely had they stripped the cover off the smallest of the life-boats when the search-light fell upon them and they had to hide again.

"What's that?" asked Corbyn anxiously, and

pointed to a long, black object which went churning past the steamer's stern with a white wake behind it.

"Good God!" his friend cried, leaping to the rail, "they're trying to torpedo us! Can you swim, Corbyn? Then dive! Dive deep!"

He set the example on the instant, going overside with a clean downward sweep which carried him to a great depth, and even then he kicked his way still lower.

A sudden, heart-rending shock withdrew the dead weight of the water from on top of him, and he had only time to draw a single breath of agony before the chasm closed in again, burying him so that it seemed as though he might never escape. The whirlpool caused by the sinking ship dragged him still deeper in its wild vortex. He was almost insensible before he felt solid foundation underfoot, and, kicking off with a final, despairing effort shot surfacewards again.

The blood rushed to his head, his lungs were bursting, but he kept his mouth shut, and, after an age of suffering, shot waist-high from the swirling brine.

A gasp of anguish escaped him and he sank again, but not so far; and in another moment he was swimming, somewhat feebly but with free air to help him.

A floating spar swept past on the still boiling eddy. He clutched at it with hands that were almost impotent, and clung to his hold till he had recovered his wits sufficiently to make more use of it; when

he drew himself partly out of the water and looked despairingly round.

He was alone, but in the blinding light which swept the scene he saw not far away an upturned face. He left his ark of refuge without hesitation and struck out towards it.

"Corbyn!" he cried. "Corbyn, old chap!"

"Lie low," replied the face, "in case they spot us."

He uttered a sharp sigh of thankfulness, and spat the salt water from his mouth. "Good God!" said he again, "but that was a close call. Are you all right?"

"More or less," responded his friend. "I'm —— Oh, the brutes!"

A shrill, metallic buzzing broke upon their ears and a dull, distant crackle told them whence the missile had been sped.

"They've spotted us," said Corbyn quietly.

A spitfire fusillade lifted fountains of spray all round them as the bullets took the water with a hollow *plup-p*. They dived, and once more came up floating, only nose and forehead above the surface, but still the leaden storm encompassed them. A sudden, needle-like pain in the calf of one leg caused Corbyn to kick spasmodically, and his involuntary action brought down on them a closer shower.

Their position was well-nigh desperate when, out of the immediate darkness, there bore down upon

them with the rush of a racer a little low grey launch, which slowed, and stopped, and backed and stopped again almost on top of them. Two boat-hooks caught them by the collars, dragging them alongside. Strong hands hoisted them helplessly on board. A heavy body overbore them, and, while they lay there struggling vainly, she sprang forward quivering and went swishing out to sea.

A ceaseless rifle-fire enveloped her until at last she had run out of range, but still she was kept going. When distance had curtained her from the relentless light, she was slowed down a little, and a voice said, "Root out the rum, Mickey, and pass it aft. A taste of it'll maybe do your Dago brethren here no harm."

"Dago yourself!" interpolated Allardyce indignantly. "We're white men. What are you?"

"Better say Bourbon, Mick," the voice continued cheerily. "Excuse me, boys. I ought to have asked the colour of your complexions, but ——"

"Let me apologise," said the Englishman, sitting up. "I thought you were the enemy, and—you're American?"

"From Newspaper Row. The New York *Wireless* owns me. My name's Challoner. Here's the rye—drink hearty!"

They both obeyed, with great good will, and felt much the better of their captor's prescription. "I'd give you a cigar," he added, "but it would be too dangerous. We'll show no light until we're safely

ashore. I'll head back for La Boca now, and by the way we'll have time to swap stories.

"I suppose you know there's trouble afoot in this cursed country. That's why I'm inhabiting it."

"What sort of trouble?" Corbyn asked curiously as the light craft turned almost on her heel and held a straight course for the far-off lights.

"Two sorts," the correspondent answered carelessly. "One's civil war, the other—woman. My business is with the former."

A somewhat awkward silence supervened. He seemed to be awaiting their reciprocal confidence, but neither felt inclined to mislead him, on the one hand, or, on the other, to explain their presence in such company as that from which they had been so abruptly severed.

He spoke again himself. "A rose," he said, "by any other name ——"

"Mine's Allardyce," said that youth frankly.

"And your friend's is Corbyn," Challoner concluded in a whisper. "I'm glad to meet you both."

"We're rather more than thankful that you met us," Corbyn assured him.

"But how do you happen to know who we are?"

Their rescuer cogitated for a time before he answered, and then spoke swiftly in a low tone: "My man Miguel's a good fellow," said he, "but, all the same, I never open my mouth too wide when he's about.

"They're cruel devils in this locality, and very apt

to screw what information they want out of a native: so that it's safer to say little and listen a lot.

"Now I want you gentlemen to understand that I'm here for my paper only and all the time. The *Wireless* wants war news, and I supply it. You know what that means, Mr. Allardyce. You don't remember me, but we met at Pinar del Rio in '98."

"I was there for the British News Bureau," the Englishman answered, "but ——"

"And I was working for the *Wireless*, in the costume of a teamster," the other explained. "I wanted very badly to borrow some tobacco from you, but the Spaniards were so suspicious that I didn't dare to look your way.

"However—I heard that you had sailed on the *Hilario*, and, when the *Mariposa* brought her in, I thought I'd take a run round the bay.

"Every one here knows what her cargo was, and as soon as the President came cavorting down from the capital it was easy to foresee trouble for those on board. They call him the Tiger of San Benito—and he's proud of his reputation.

"But here you both are, safe and sound in spite of him; which is good enough to go on with."

That was all that passed at the moment, but the two drenched adventurers surmised that he knew something of the errand which had brought them there.

They would have asked further questions, but

"Stand by!" said Challoner suddenly. "They're after us."

Against the glare ashore they saw a dim black shape which became a boat as they bore down upon it under their own impetus. A stumpy funnel showed it to be a steam launch. The land-breeze brought to their ears the echo of angry voices.

"I tell you she put out to sea," one was protesting volubly. "There's no such craft belonging to this port, and, while we're pottering about here they'll have made a landing behind Punta Gorda."

"*Por dios*, then!" another cried, and he spoke like Gonzalez, "put us about and get back to the *Mariposa*. His Excellency will be wild with us, and all the wilder if we keep him waiting."

"It may be that the cockle-shell has sunk. Some of our bullets must have bitten through her."

"Hist!" snapped the first. "A light here, quick!"

He was obeyed, and a big lamp shone forth across the water.

"Duck down," commanded Challoner, "we're going to get it."

Hardly had he spoken when the dancing rays descended upon his head and shoulders where he was sitting up to steer, and, with a howl of triumph, those on board the steamer gave the order to head after him.

Zip-zsss-s-s a bullet came whistling past, and others followed. It was evident that the enemy was well-armed, and little disposed to offer quarter.

The motor-boat held a straight course across their bows. "Ram her!" Gonzalez screamed ecstatically.

"Sit tight," said Challoner, and took both hands to the tiller.

He turned her almost squarely off her course and she careened to starboard till she all but overturned, but still she shot ahead and the very suddenness of the movement disconcerted her pursuers.

Corbyn looking back saw one of the men in the boat level a rifle very carefully at Challoner, and springing up, pulled the correspondent aside as a dull flash and a quick burning agony in his own right arm told him that he had been in time and no more.

"What's up?" asked Challoner.

"Nothing," he answered dully, and crouched down again, setting his teeth against the hurt.

The pursuers had to slacken fire because there was not room for more than two or three riflemen in their bows and these spoiled each other's aim, but, with a roar of baffled rage, they followed at their best speed, their funnel spitting flame and sparks.

Challoner laughed to himself as they dropped astern. "We've got the heels of them," he volunteered, "and once we're out of sight I'll turn and run for the landing. It's lucky that we met them where we did, and now we know exactly where they are; if it had been closer in-shore they might have kept us out all night and nipped us in day-light."

A breathless ten minutes took them across the bay. They slipped quietly past the *Mariposa*, which was still using her search-light seawards to help the launch, and shortly ran alongside a ledge of rock on the outskirts of La Boca.

"Step lively, please," requested their almost invisible friend, and they jumped ashore with great good will.

"I like dry land," said Corbyn aside to Allardyce. "Don't you?"

"I love it," answered the other, shuffling gleefully on solid earth.

"When you're quite done dog-dancing," Challoner interrupted, "perhaps you'll lend a hand to house the boat. It would be awkward for us if —"

They turned and saw the man Miguel laying a roller down on the gently shelving strip of sand that lay between the water's edge and the black wall of rock behind them. All four laid hands on the little craft and she ran smoothly up the ways to her hiding-place, a low cave at the cliff-foot. A heavy door, swinging on well-oiled hinges, shut her in as soon as Miguel had retrieved the rollers. "Come this way and step lively," said Challoner, turning along the beach.

They tramped along the shore for ten minutes, and then turned up a steep slope which took them to a level road running parallel at that height with the curve of the coast. Challoner called a halt till he could be sure that no passer-by would observe them, and they crossed it quickly. Another climb,

but longer, brought them to a squat building which occupied a little plateau, a mere terrace in the rock-face, overhung by the heights above, looking down into the depths below, approachable only by the path they had followed.

"This is my shack. Come right in," he said hospitably, and threw open the door of a snug, lamp-lit living-room which opened on to the wide, trellised porch. "I'll fish out some dry kit for you, and—Shucks! They hit you, did they? That was why you pulled me aside when we were at close quarters with those pirates! It's your right arm, too. That bullet would have come close to corpsing me if you hadn't ——"

"It's nothing," Corbyn broke in, looking down at the blood-stained handkerchief he had managed to bind about his wound in the darkness, and Challoner said no more. He set the other down in a chair, brought in warm water and a case of surgical implements, cut the coat-sleeve clear, and doctored the hurt very deftly.

"Clean through," he announced on examination. "A nickel-nosed bullet. If it had been soft lead I'd have had to saw your arm off, my friend. As it is, you'll be all right in a few days, but it will be a bit stiff and sore to-morrow."

He knotted the bandage he had applied with dexterous fingers, and, as Corbyn rose, led them through to an inner room, threw open a capacious cupboard, slipped back a panel and pulled forth a great variety of costumes.

"My stage wardrobe," he said briskly. "I sometimes have to dodge about in disguise. Suit yourselves as to cut and colour. I'd recommend these dark things and a soft sombrero. They're less likely to attract attention than the clothes you're wearing, and I've ruined your coat in any case, Corbyn. Supper will be waiting by the time you're ready."

He nodded approvingly when they appeared in their change of clothing.

"You'll pass all right in the crowd," said he. "Sit in."

Over the welcome meal he had provided they were too busy with healthy appetites to talk much, and afterwards their host explained very frankly that he could not keep them longer.

"I'm here myself on sufferance," he informed them apologetically, "and I can't afford to be under the slightest suspicion of complicity in any matter which does not immediately concern the *Wireless*. I know you won't bear me any ill-will on that account, and I've had to send Meggs word to the same effect. Yes, I had news from him about you, and I've done what I could in consequence. I don't know what his game is, and I don't want to be told if you know—but I hope you and he won't get into any trouble. I'd do more than a good deal for Meggs but—I'm drawing pay from the *Wireless*, and it won't allow me to have any friends while I'm working, in case the authorities here turn sour on me.

"That's why I must ask you to forget that you've

met me, and all you've seen: especially the boat, and where I keep it. Henceforth we're strangers in a strange land. I'm sorry, but it's absolutely necessary, and, if God's good to us all, we'll maybe meet again in Manhattan. Then I'll be better able to prove that I'm not ungrateful to you for having saved my life, Corbyn. And, apart from that, I owe Landguard, your brother-in-law, more than one good turn. Yes, I know him pretty well. I met him in Egypt.

"Do you need any money? Talk straight about it."

They shook their heads.

"Got your guns?"

They nodded.

"You'll find oil and rags and mixed ammunition in that cigar-box. Help yourselves to anything you find useful."

He left them for a few minutes and when he returned they were once more ready for action.

"The road is clear," he said, and escorted them to the foot of the path, keeping carefully in the deepest shadow.

"I hate this hole and corner work," he muttered as they shook hands at the roadside, "but—you can understand my position. Turn to the right, and the high-road leads straight to La Boca. Look after yourselves there, and bear in mind that the natives, who ought to know what they're talking about, call it La Boca del Tigre.

“Good-bye, good-bye. No, you don’t owe me a word of thanks. I’m in your debt. That’s how we stand. Good luck to both of you!”

He hurried after them, “Give Meggs my remembrances when you see him,” said he. “I don’t know where I may be by then. And I almost forgot to tell you that you’ll find fairly safe quarters at the Golden Eagle, if you mention Rose to the fat woman you’ll find there. I fixed that with her. It was all I could do for you.”

“Good little sort of old Samaritan!” Allardyce soliloquised, as he and his friend followed the dusty road at a round pace. “I almost wish he were with us in this. Newspaper corresponding is a soulless business.

“What kind of place is La Boca del Tigre, Corbyn? The English of it’s the Tiger’s Mouth, eh?”

And Corbyn laughed inconsequently as he replied, “Yes, the Tiger’s Mouth.”

CHAPTER VI

THE TIGER'S CLAWS.

SEATED in the small cabin of the *Mariposa* with the Tiger of San Benito confronting her, the outward attitude of Beatriz Ybarra showed no trace of her inward discomposure.

She answered half disdainfully his cursory inquiries as to her treatment on the trip from New York, knowing that he was already posted in all its details, and evinced no curiosity whatever as to the further dispositions he had made for her. Only when he expressed the hope that she had come prepared to remain among her country-folk did she deem it worth while to utter a quietly emphatic negative.

"I shall return to Washington when I think fit," she added.

"And yet you were born under the Golden Cross, my cousin," the President said, his hot eyes drinking in all her beauty, and her heart sank, for he spoke truth. Above the home in Washington to which her father, the minister of San Benito, had taken his American wife, had floated the emblem of the republic he represented. And now her country

claimed her, through its head, for though she had been born in the United States and was to all intents and purposes an American, she still owed allegiance to San Benito.

"It makes no difference," she said steadfastly. "I have come here peaceably rather than run the risk of public scandal, but do not think that I fear you, Ygnacio. I shall return to Washington when I think fit. My home is there, where my father and mother are buried.

"You will be well advised not to give me cause to cut my visit to this country short."

"But first you will go with me to the capital," he stipulated cunningly. "The populace is all agog to see you. It is so long since you were with us, and—they love you, Beatriz, even as I do. Your presence in the palace will be very helpful to me in my task of government. You are aware, no doubt, that these are troublous times in San Benito. Surely you will do so much for your native land."

"Please, spare me argument of that sort," she interrupted fearlessly. "It rings too falsely from the mouth of him they call ——"

The *Mariposa* shook from stem to stern under the shock of a most deafening explosion. The speaker held up helpless hands as a fell glare crimsoned the tiny cabin. She sank back, shuddering, and shut her eyes, but did not once cry out.

Ybarra cast one anxious glance towards her and

then sprang through the doorway. He had been waiting for that moment.

He knew exactly what had happened, since it was by his order that the inhuman crime had been committed. A moment's survey of the scene above assured him of his own immunity from danger, and with that he went forward as far as the bridge.

He met O'Dare carrying Fifi aft in a half-fainting state.

"Go to your mistress," he said gruffly.

"Go to the devil," Dennis retorted with equal acerbity, and so passed on.

Gonzalez was at the search-light on the bridge, and His Excellency greeted him with words of approval.

"A well-planned piece of work," he said, and the man who had sold his shipmates bowed before him.

"*Humilde servidor de Vuestra Exclencia,*" he answered, a tinge of irony in his tone. "Your Excellency's humble servant."

The President glanced sharply at him—Ybarra was quick-witted—and he went on, in haste.

"Your Excellency had word from me of the Americano, Corbyn, in whom the doña Beatriz was interested."

"What of it?" snapped Ybarra. It irritated him to be reminded that some other man might have forestalled him with his cousin. Gonzalez knew it would.

"He has followed her here from New York," he said, still more daringly.

"Thousand thunders of God!" cried his master. "Why do you stand there idle while he still lives? Would you mock me, dog! with indifference? Is it thus that you do the work you are paid for?"

Gonzalez shrank from before him.

"Pardon, Excellency," he stammered. "Give me time to finish. Then judge whether I have done my work well or ill. It was on board the *Hilario* that he came to La Boca."

Ybarra's lips closed over his snarling teeth again. The insane, unreasoning anger in his eyes gave place to a horrid mirth. He threw back his head, and laughed aloud.

"It was on the *Hilario* that he came to La Boca! You have done well, Joaquin. On the day that I wed the doña Beatriz you will have your reward. Not before then, for the treasury is almost empty, but not a day later, I pledge you my word. You have done well."

Gonzalez felt glad that he had been allowed to finish, and resolved that he would not again impart such news piecemeal. It was too dangerous to trifle with the Tiger. Such jests were all too apt to recoil on the jester's head. He started nervously as the President gripped his arm and pointed to a floating spar on the still boiling surface of the sea which now hid the *Hilario*, but, understanding instantly, called his men forward, bade them open

fire on every visible object. In his zeal he had the President's own launch manned, was about to set out in it to make sure that the process of extirpation was quite complete, when he saw a little low grey motor-boat shoot suddenly into the danger-zone, stop there, and then speed seawards.

Ybarra had also seen it. He cursed Gonzalez hotly for his slowness, and bade him capture or sink the small boat whatever effort it might cost.

"And don't be long about it, either," he ordered contradictorily. "I'm going ashore in an hour, and I'll want the launch."

When the launch got back he was waiting it at the gangway, in no very amiable frame of mind, to judge from the greeting he gave its occupants.

"Did you get them?" he demanded.

"*Si, señor Presidente,*" answered Gonzalez in a propitiatory tone, "we riddled them so that they sank, but only after a stern chase."

He lied; the men about him knew he lied, but no one dared to contradict him. The Tiger's temper was altogether too variable to encourage the taking of risks in the cause of truth.

"Make ready to receive my lady cousin," said that personage abruptly, and went back to the cabin, from which he presently emerged with Beatriz and her small suite.

Silence obtained among them on the way shoreward, but at the landing-stage there was no lack of noise and light.

La Boca was ostensibly and ostentatiously loyal to the party in power. The President had struck hard at the revolutionary movement in condemning the *Hilario* with all on board to total annihilation. The town was ready to acclaim him; he was the hero of the hour.

It was known also that his cousin was on board the *Mariposa*; florid accounts of his romantic passion for her had appeared in the local press; great stress was laid upon her wealth and power and beauty; she was the favourite daughter of San Benito.

"*Viva Ybarra!* Long live his espoused!" was the ceaseless cry of the mob beyond the barriers, while the guns boomed and rockets spat skywards. And Beatriz, on his arm, passed up the crimson carpet between two thickets of bayonets, because she could not help herself.

Under an illuminated arch of triumph at the street-corner they entered an open carriage, drawn by four splendid horses, while the troopers of the cavalry escort about it sat with swords at the carry and young Von Rudolf, their foreign general, swept hilt to chin and swore beneath his breath for shame of his employment. He knew himself a hireling, but it hurt sorely that a woman of the outer world should be witness of his servitude. The day had been when his jewelled sabre had shone in scenes less tawdry, with a coat of arms upon it where there was nothing now but a scratched surface.

A very handsome figure was the young general, gorgeously uniformed and yet no mere carpet-soldier, as the good folk of La Boca had cause to know. But none of them knew the story of why he had sold himself into bondage, or that, while he did his duty so brilliantly, he hated and despised the country of his adoption. The bright eyes on the balconies there had no attraction for him. He was wondering where he had seen Fifi before, hoping that neither she nor the bewitchingly beautiful woman beside Ybarra would notice him in his shame.

There were more carriages behind for such of the officials as were privileged to attend the President. O'Dare secured the first of these and into that, despite the black looks of the others, he handed Fifi. The entourage moved off, Von Rudolf riding at Ybarra's side, his restless glance on Beatriz, and drove towards the outskirts of the town, in which was situated the private residence of its Governor, with whom His Excellency was wont to reside during his visits to La Boca.

Having traversed the main streets at a trot, amid the cheering of the throng and showers of blossoms from the crowded balconies, in response to which His Excellency bowed most graciously while Beatriz sat motionless beside him, they came to a more sparsely populated outskirt, and, leaving that also behind, reached a long low white edifice set well back from the road behind trim lawns. Its pillared portico, ablaze with lamps, was guarded by armed men.

Ybarra helped his cousin to alight and led her indoors without waiting for his host, the Governor. Her two retainers followed unhesitatingly. Hearing their footsteps on the tessellated floor Ybarra stopped and turned towards them.

"Await me in the anteroom," he said peremptorily to O'Dare. "And you," to Fifi, "may follow your mistress."

"I am at Miss Ybarra's orders," O'Dare answered carelessly.

His Excellency looked him up and down from under narrowed eyelids, looked past him at the sentries on the porch, and seemed to be considering something.

"In this country ——" he was beginning softly, when the other interrupted him without regard for etiquette.

"In this country—or in any other," Dennis O'Dare retorted truculently, "I'm an American citizen, and don't you forget that, my friend. Keep your orders for your own servants."

"Enough!" snapped Don Ygnacio furiously, and went his way.

It led him to a locked door, which he opened with a master-key attached to his watch-chain. He motioned to the others that they should pass through and closed it carefully again, sat seats for the two women and once more turned to the recalcitrant Dennis.

"You know my name?" he asked, and the sudden-

ness of the question hissed between set teeth was disconcerting.

"You're called Ygnacio Ybarra, I understand," said O'Dare.

"I'm called the Tiger of San Benito," His Excellency answered in a grating voice. "You will be wise, my friend, to keep clear of my claws."

"I'll clip 'em for you when the time comes," O'Dare promised recklessly.

"So far I have been patient, for your cousin's sake, but—even now I have my scissors ready."

He shook his coat-sleeve, holding out his hand so that only two should see within its palm the blue muzzle of the weapon he was carrying so conveniently.

Ybarra did not blanch, but stood there motionless.

"You are a braver man than I had thought you, *señor secretario*," he remarked without a tremor. "I wonder—is this—this gentleman to be trusted, Beatriz?" he asked of his cousin in a changed tone. "Can you assure me that he has no connection with the insurgent party?"

She looked across at Dennis with anxious eyes, and he bowed in response.

"I'll give you my word for that," she answered relievedly.

"Thank you," said Ybarra. "I think I can find use for him. We'll keep him with us. I had intended ——

"Excuse me for a few moments."

He went over to the door, at which a low knock had sounded, and admitted half a dozen men, all in resplendent uniform save one. That one was Gonzalez, and he seemed strangely perturbed.

He scowled when he saw O'Dare in the background, but took no other notice of him. The others had their turn of audience and disappeared before the President led his spy to one side and entered into low-toned conversation with him.

"Excellency," the spy said, "there is bad news to tell. Two men escaped from the *Hilario*, and one was the cursed Americano, Corbyn.

"And worse," he went on hurriedly while his employer glared at him in speechless anger. "A number of men and horses have been landed behind Punta Gorda since the troops there were withdrawn to attend you here. And they are not natives of San Benito."

Ybarra bit his lips till the blood came, but restrained all outward expression of anger in his cousin's presence. It would not have been politic to display his true temper just then.

"You told me you had sunk the boat we saw," he said in a terrible whisper.

"Had they been in it they would not now be alive," Gonzalez asserted recklessly. "We sank her far out at sea. They got ashore by the inner bay. They must have passed the *Mariposa*. The searchlight should have been used on all sides, not only seawards."

His clever argument impressed Ybarra. In any case recrimination was now futile.

"You will lay hands on him instantly," the President commanded, "and—you know what to do with him."

Gonzalez grinned evilly.

"Or, stay! I may have use for him alive. I might set a price on his safety."

He glanced toward Beatriz, and almost chuckled to think how fortune was favouring him in spite of himself.

"You lay hands on him," he repeated, "and clap him in prison. Let him rough it with the common herd, but I'll hold you answerable that he's still alive when I send for him. The worse he looks then the more sympathy he'll excite—in the proper quarter—but see to it that he's still able to speak for himself when the time comes.

"And as to those others—— How many made landing?"

"The peasant who brought word thinks there must have been about a hundred."

Ybarra tugged at his black moustache. "Who knows where they have come from!" he soliloquised fretfully. "In any case, I cannot afford to start fighting on this side of the Pass till I'm forced to it. I must go on to Alta Cruz. Yes, there's no help for it. And they can't follow me there, whoever they are. Send me word to the post at the summit, Gonzalez. Now, go."

He turned back towards the waiting trio.

"We leave at once," he said. "I had hoped to rest here until to-morrow, but it seems that our road is safer in the dark than during daylight. Come, Beatriz."

They followed him obediently through a curtained door-way in the rear, across a covered court where there was a tinkling fountain among low palm-trees, and out into the open air.

Armed men were waiting at the exit also, and, beyond them, the two carriages they had come in were dimly visible, drivers on seats, postilions in saddle, grooms at the horses' heads.

Von Rudolf came forward, spurred and booted, and the President held consultation with him for an instant.

"Take the first carriage," O'Dare was told, and he helped Fifi into it, while the young soldier drew back but still followed her with puzzled eyes.

Ybarra and his cousin entered the other, Von Rudolf mounted and rode off, to head the cortége, which started almost silently. A galloping advance-guard cleared the way for it and a troop of carbineers followed in rear.

Travelling at a swift pace, despite the bad repair in which the narrow suburban roads seemed to be kept, Fifi and Dennis O'Dare found it all they could do to maintain their respective corners as the cumbersome vehicle bumped and swung and jolted to and fro upon its leathern slings. Yet

they were not ill-content with their lot, if one might judge from their cheerful acceptance of a by no means over-cheerful situation.

A thunder-storm was brewing among the mountains above them and pitch darkness covered the landscape with a heavy pall.

"I wonder where we're bound for now," said O'Dare jerkily. "We've left all the houses behind and there isn't a light to be seen. I hope our cabby knows the road."

"He's sure to," Fifi answered literally, "or the President would not employ him. And I overheard them speaking of Alta Cruz, wherever that is. It's too late now to worry; we'll have to wait and see what happens."

"I guess you're right," agreed Dennis admiringly. "I was half afraid you would be worried by all this bustle. It's been such a queer journey since the start. We've scarcely had time to think."

"I'd have felt horribly frightened if you hadn't been with us," she admitted naively; "but you're so brave, Denny."

"Me!" he protested, smitten with astonishment. "My heart's been in my boots most of the time."

"The ones you left up-stairs in Twenty-Third Street?" she asked roguishly, for he had told her the story of that ill-starred exploit.

"The ones at your feet now," he replied audaciously and so fell silent.

For a long time there was naught to be heard but

the dull rumble of their upward progress, the fall of the whip-lash, the straining of the horses at the traces. After a seemingly endless struggle they reached the crest of the high hill they had been climbing, and without a moment's pause plunged downward on a slope so steep that their pace could not but be dangerous.

"I haven't felt so intense since the last time I was at Coney Island," O'Dare confided to his companion, making light of the risk to soothe her trembling. He had possessed himself of her hand. "Shooting the chutes is child's play compared with sliding sideways down the Andes. Whew! What was that?"

A spark had shot across the window. Another followed it. Their speed was slackening. More sparks and larger. Slower still. They stopped before a blazing camp-fire upon a plateau on the mountainside.

Men flew to the horses' heads. There were fresh ones waiting to take their places.

Other men came to the carriage door and stood there expectantly.

O'Dare let down the window which he had closed on account of the dust and looked out. They bared their heads and bowed before him.

"If you think I'm his nibs, you must guess again," he remarked in a conversational tone, "but if any one of you can speak any known language, I'd be glad of a few words with that one."

"You're an American?" asked a voice from the background.

"I have that honor," answered O'Dare.

"Where is His Excellency?"

"I can't say for sure, but I'm inclined to think he'll run slap into us presently."

This information turned into Spanish by his questioner set the others moving up the road, and left the interpreter by himself at the door.

"Any news worth telling?" inquired that individual.

"Where are we?" demanded Dennis.

"Half-way between La Boca and Alta Cruz. Didn't you know?"

"I know next to nothing. Who are our friends here?"

"Camp of the Tenth Infantry, guarding the Pass."

"Against what?"

"Oh, the revolutionists. What's your line, anyway? You're one of the President's people, aren't you?"

"Not by a long mile, my friend. Thanks for the compliment, but I'm not that sort of wild beast. Not by a long mile. I'm private secretary to Miss Ybarra, and my name's O'Dare. What's yours?"

The invisible stranger came forward and leaned over the window-sill, looking intently at Dennis by the flickering firelight.

"I'm Challoner—of the New York *Wireless*," he

said in a low tone. "You don't happen to know a man called Meggs, do you?"

"Never heard of the gentleman," answered O'Dare very cheerfully.

"Sorry I spoke. Look out! Here's the other carriage."

A grievous jerk and they were off again with four fresh horses: but the stranger clung to the step for a moment.

"Don't mention Meggs' name up above," he begged earnestly ere he dropped off.

Dennis O'Dare snorted wrathfully.

"Why the deuce should I mention Meggs' name up above!" he demanded. "I don't suppose the grocer would give me a packet of breakfast food if I did. I've more to do than run round South America mentioning names!"

He turned to look out at the grey dawn creeping down the steep mountainside, and straightway forgot all else in sharing with Fifi the sight of its gathering splendour.

Challoner had already run back to the second conveyance, around which a ring of guards had already been stationed and, after some argument, was allowed to approach His Excellency.

"Who's that?" Ybarra demanded suspiciously.

"You special correspondents are a perfect curse!" he cried after the other had explained. "There's nothing I can tell you to-night," he added in a more conciliatory tone. "You are aware, no doubt, that

I was forced to sink the *Hilario* at her moorings in La Boca. They were about to open fire upon me from on board. The revolution is practically crushed and I'm on my way back to the capital. That's all there is to it. Tell your paper that I rule with a firm hand."

He spoke in English, and his cousin, hearing that, came forth. But he interposed in such wise that Challoner had to give place without the opportunity for more than a surreptitious glance at her.

"Why aren't those horses yoked in?" shouted His Excellency stormily. "I'm waiting—I, the President of San Benito!

"Let me assist you to your seat, Beatriz. Your pardon, but time presses. Daylight brings danger."

He shut the door, and spoke sharply to the officers clustered about the open window. An orderly brought him a bundle of telegrams from the field-station where they had tapped the line between La Boca and Alta Cruz.

He took them eagerly and, opening one after another with great rapidity, read their contents by the fire-light, tearing them into fragments as he finished. The last proved singularly displeasing to him, and he swore bitterly under his breath as he read it through a second time, an attention he had bestowed on none of the others.

"So soon!" he muttered, and seemed to be engrossed in cogitation until he called the telegraph orderly over and gave him a low-voiced message.

"Make sure that he gets it—if you have any regard for yourself," he finished with threat in his tone.

The man saluted cringingly and withdrew. His Excellency gave the word, whips cracked, and he was whirled away.

Challoner had already retired unobtrusively, and before he had been missed was safely in the saddle, breasting the upward road on his way back to La Boca.

"I'll take no chances with that crowd," he said to himself with a sagacious shake of the head. "When Don Ygnacio shows disapproval his underlings are apt to do the same."

On the summit he dismounted and led his horse off the road to a safe distance. It stood there panting, while he unstrapped from the saddle a pair of sharp-edged wire-cutters and a small canvas-covered case containing a complete equipment for "tapping" the telegraph wires.

With the aid of these he was presently able to read off the President's message to Gonzalez.

"That's the worst possible news," he told himself frowningly.

"Meggs must have landed, but what beats me is how he could get into so much trouble in such a short time. He's certainly broken all records in that respect. I rather fancy I'll find the Golden Eagle in ruins when I get there."

CHAPTER VII

WHAT THE BLIND BEGGAR SAW.

"WHAT were you doing in San Benito before, Corbyn?" Allardyce asked, as he and his friend strode down-hill toward La Boca.

"Nothing in particular," the other answered. "I took a West Indian trip one winter—in my more wealthy days, before Dad left me to my own devices—and stopped off here with some other fellows. I wanted to see what the place was like. We went up to Alta Cruz, in the mountains, and had a good time generally."

"What sort of chap is the Tiger?"

Corbyn's brow darkened.

"I've never met him," he said, "but I've heard a good deal about him one way and the other, and—I'd help to hang him without any scruples of conscience. He has none."

"Speak of the devil!" exclaimed Allardyce. "Here he comes."

They sought in vain for an avenue of escape as the advance-guard of the President's procession came trotting round a corner, and at last crouched as close as they dared to the tall cactus-plants which lined

both sides of the roadway there. Corbyn caught sight of a known face in the first carriage, and almost cried out in the extremity of his amazement, while Allardyce all but fell back among the cruel spikes behind him as he saw Fifi Florian and O'Dare driven swiftly past in the second. He had half risen as if to follow them when Corbyn clutched at his arm and dragged him down again, but too late. Gonzalez was staring with intent malevolence in their direction from the front seat of one of the following vehicles. He spoke to a lean, dwarf-like, dried-up individual seated beside him, who also peered back at them but could see little through the dust. More carriages and then the rear-guard rattled past, leaving them coughing by the roadside, with choked lungs. There was no time to be wasted.

"Get a move on," Corbyn commanded. "Gonzalez will send back immediately."

They took to their heels at their best speed, but treading carefully that they might leave no avoidable trail, and left the highway at the first cross-road, climbed a sod wall and threw themselves down in the long lucerne it enclosed. They saw that their fears had not been groundless, for almost immediately three lancers and a non-commissioned officer went cantering past their place of refuge towards the town, scanning the shadows carefully.

Corbyn sat up as the jingle of their accoutrements died away in the distance, and Allardyce laughed cheerfully.

"They're on a wild-geese chase," said he, "and we're the wild geese. Gonzalez will be wilder when they get back without us. What do you think of Denny, Corbyn? Isn't he one of the seven wonders! And Fifi, too! What are we going to do about it?"

Corbyn made no reply, and he continued without waiting any.

"How in thunder did he get here, eh? And what is he doing with Fifi in that circus, anyway? What does it all mean, Corbyn? It's a Chinese puzzle to me."

"Allardyce," his companion broke in, and the Englishman looked at him in surprise, so tensely strained was his tone, "did you notice the girl beside Ybarra in the first carriage?"

"I got a glimpse and no more of a very beautiful face."

"That was the face you saw on my easel one day, and admired so much. I—I sent it to the Academy."

"The deuce it was!" Allardyce whistled softly. He was much interested. Here promised romance.

"I've never told you before," Corbyn continued, "because—— Oh, you understand. I'm too poor, for one thing. And she's enormously wealthy. But she had promised to wait for me, and—I know now that she won't break her word. She told me once that she would never set foot in this country again of her own free will."

"Who is she?" asked Allardyce, still in the dark.

"Beatriz Ybarra. She's a half-cousin of that—of the President, and he's asked her more than once to marry him. He's desperately hard up, and she—she's afraid of him, Allardyce. Challoner must have referred to her when he spoke of the troubles here. I know she hasn't come to San Benito willingly. And now I must find out, if I can, where that scoundrel has taken her. If anything happens me and I don't turn up again, you'll explain to Meggs."

He held out a hand that shook in spite of himself, but the other ignored it.

"I'm going with you," said Allardyce gruffly.

They turned back to the highway, without more words, and followed it cautiously but at a swift pace in the direction from which they had come.

"There's been foul play," Corbyn muttered miserably. "There may be more. I can see now why Gonzalez was so anxious to get my studio, and why I got no reply to my letters.

"She had been in Europe, Allardyce, since her father died, and on the day she landed I was at Florian's funeral. I wrote her, though, and wrote again, without getting an answer. I wrote a third time, and then I—I supposed she had made up her mind to drop me. My poverty was more than sufficient excuse. I had called at her hotel, too. They asked my name and then told me she was not at home. That's why I joined Meggs."

Allardyce had listened intently.

"There's some mystery about the whole business," said he. "Denny's disappearance—and turning up here in her company. It seems to me that he must have strayed out during the night and been kidnapped by Gonzalez—— But that doesn't matter at present. What—— There's the show starting off again—there among the trees."

They ran like men possessed, but the distance was too great. Ere they could reach the turn of the road the shadowy cavalcade Allardyce had observed sweep past the end of the low white building had gained the highway and disappeared at a canter. A gaping countryman stood looking after the cloud of dust it had left, and of him they sought information.

There were two carriages only, he told them. The President and his party, another man and two ladies, just four, all told. Off for Alta Cruz, since the road led nowhere else. That might be fifty miles, or maybe a hundred. He had never been there, and could not say to within an odd mile or so. But it was over the mountains, and a long way. He took the coin that Corbyn offered, and slouched away, dully indifferent.

"It's eighty miles by rail," Corbyn told Allardyce, "and the road should be shorter."

He stood still, cogitating in great distress of mind, and his friend put forward no suggestion.

"We had better get back to the Golden Eagle," he said at length, and they once more retraced their steps.

"That was why Gonzalez was so anxious to get my studio," he reiterated by the way. "What a blind fool I was to distrust her so easily! The least I might have done was to get her dismissal by word of mouth. That's where my cursed pride has cost me a fall. And now she's here, in the net. They've trapped her at last—and perhaps through me.

"Allardyce, I must cut loose from Meggs. I must go to her. She's in the gravest danger. It will be my fault if she comes to any harm here."

"We'll go together, old chap," said Allardyce soothingly, for Corbyn was strangely excited. "Meggs will let us go willingly. If there's no news of him we'll leave word explaining. He'll understand. We'll get a move on first thing to-morrow and reach Alta Cruz almost as soon as she."

Corbyn nodded and no more was said in the mean time. They took to a dark side-lane which ran parallel with the main road, and presently emerged within the busier centre of La Boca, a network of narrow streets, some paved with wood, others all but impassable by reason of the pristine cobblestones.

Electric cars whizzed past on some of the streets, and high-wheeled carts with strings of patient oxen in their yokes crept along others. Some were well-lighted, lined with stores which would have graced an Old World city; others had only murky oil lamps at great intervals, and still seemed to smell of mediæval Spain and mystery.

Through these, however, the two wanderers took their way, eschewing glare for gloom and courting privacy rather than publicity.

"Our friend forgot to tell us where the Golden Eagle has its eyrie," Corbyn observed more calmly, as they debouched upon a shabby square surrounded by squat buildings, and boasting four gaunt bushes for sole ornament. "I don't remember it. We'll have to ask our way before we go much farther."

"We'd better take a cab," said Allardyce. "It's doubling the risk, and halving the difficulty. I don't think we should face the electrics on foot."

They stopped, and presently a ramshackle victoria crawled past.

They hailed it and had jumped in before the drowsy driver had finished his yawning fit.

"*Al Aguila de Oro*," ordered Allardyce in a hoarse voice.

"*Si, señor*," the driver answered civilly. "*En la calle 18 de Junio*."

He drove along the main street in the direction from which they had come and they sat back with folded arms, their soft hats drawn well down. Three lancers and a non-commissioned officer came clattering past them, and they puffed very nervously at their cigars, but in the end they reached the Golden Eagle safely.

It was, according to the sign above the gateway, an unassuming *fonda y posada*, a humble inn for

the accommodation of the country-folk and the great carts they came to town in. The courtyard was crowded with the latter and the lowing of oxen sounded from its adjacent outhouses.

The street on which it stood was an ill-lighted and empty relic of a former age. It would not have been easy to discover a spot more suited to their immediate needs.

Allardyce paid and dismissed the cabman with an assumption of indifference which he was far from feeling.

"I didn't dare to ask how much he wanted, but I guess I hit the right figure, plus a fair tip, first time," he told Corbyn complacently. "I'll bet he thinks we know La Boca to its foundations. It wouldn't have been wise to let him know we are strangers."

They entered a long, narrow room which apparently combined the attributes of café, bar, and office. It was grudgingly lit and sparsely occupied by groups of dust-grimed *carrteros* quenching the thirst engendered by their day's journey.

These took no notice of the new arrivals, who passed onward to the desk which overlooked a pewter-covered counter, behind which a black-gowned woman of ample proportions was counting the contents of her till.

"Have you rooms for two?" Allardyce asked her after exchange of greetings. She looked up without displaying any undue interest.

"It depends on who the two are," she answered slowly. "The señores have no baggage?"

"We had—on the *Hilario*," he said in a low tone and his eyes did not fall before her startled glance.

"If you are for the Reds," she whispered, "I cannot house you here."

"We are not for the Reds, but for the rose," he ventured, pointing to the fresh flower which stood in a vase at one corner of her desk.

"Chombo!" she cried aloud, and a mulatto servant came shuffling in. "Show the señores to the rooms on the balcony," she whispered to him.

They followed the slipshod Chombo across an inner court upon which opened many doorways, up a steep wooden stair, and through a narrow passage to an outer gallery overhanging what seemed to be a back street. From the balcony they entered two connecting bedrooms, shabby and sparsely furnished.

Their guide drew the curtains closely across the doors and lit a couple of candles.

"Be very circumspect, caballeros," he said, and slipped away without another word.

Corbyn followed him as far as the passage, but paused there to examine a heavy iron grating hooked back against the wall about half way through. It worked on hinges; he pulled and it came smoothly to; there were strong bolts on either side.

He shot those next him and went back well pleased.

"We're safe as a church," he told his friend.

"There's a portcullis at the entrance and I've closed it."

"How high are we above the street?" asked Allardyce, and, crossing to the outer rail, he dropped a coin. It fell tinkling on the cobbles below.

"Too high for any one to climb without a good long ladder," he concluded. "I don't think any one will interfere with us to-night."

"Did you notice that blind beggar at the street-corner as we drove up?" asked Corbyn.

"I noticed nothing but those confounded lancers."

"He was standing there as we came in," the other continued, "feeling about him with a stick. I seemed to recognise him somehow, although I can't see how that could be possible. In any case, he started when your face showed under the lamp at the entrance. I don't like blind men who are able to interest themselves in us to that extent."

The Englishman looked grave.

"You give me the creeps," he answered. "I don't think I'll undress."

"Nor I," said Corbyn.

They blew the lights out and lay down fully clothed. Allardyce fell asleep instantly, but Corbyn tossed and turned for some time before he dropped into a troubled doze. His wound was stiffening and was more painful now, but it was his thoughts that hurt most. He was thinking of a very beautiful face, seen but for an instant through dust and

darkness, and of the cruel, triumphant features dimly outlined beside it.

It was late that night before La Boca settled down after the day's events. The presence of the President had, as usual, provided incident. The citizens were well pleased with such an excuse for lingering about the clubs and cafés. They knew he was to spend the night at the Governor's villa. There might be further entertainment for them before morning.

Nor were they disappointed in their expectations, for presently there came upon them out of the by-streets a troop of horsemen, who abused them with the flat of sword-blades to such purpose that, within five minutes, the thoroughfares were empty, and every idler was indoors, to stay.

There were no two ways about anything when the Tiger of San Benito saw fit to shake his mailed fist in the direction of the timid townfolk.

The swarthy troopers sneered to each other as the populace melted into thin air before them, but made no noise, since that had been forbidden. Even their shaggy ponies scurried soundlessly from point to point, for each had pads of felt made fast to the calkins, in accordance with Von Rudolf's ideas of strategy, as applied to night-work within the walls.

So sudden and unexpected had been their appearance that no news of their coming could spread, and they were able to draw a close cordon round the Golden Eagle without the inmates of that hos-

telry being aware that it was the objective of the expedition.

The blind beggar who was swearing at the closed grating which blocked his way to the rear balcony heard the muffled thud of horses' feet on the uneven causeway, and, turning about with marvellous celerity in spite of his affliction, was able to get the great gates fast before the storming-party reached them.

And even after the officer in charge had thundered long and loudly on their oaken panels, it took time to wake the Golden Eagle to a proper sense of that which was required of it.

First came to the grated spy-hole at the outer gate an old and deaf and decrepit woman, who could not be brought to understand that she must open to the law and that without delay.

"Thieves and assassins!" she screeched to the raging leader. "Wait where you are till I call my mistress. Robbers and murderers! Be patient, but for a moment."

They heard her hobbling off still muttering maledictions on them. It took ten long minutes to bring back the proprietress, who had many apologies to make for the unfortunate delay and sent her on a second errand for the keys.

These found, the soldiery rushed in, invaded every corner, dragged all the other inmates from their beds and stood them shivering in the courtyard.

Corbyn awoke to hear them hammering at the

grating in the passage and Allardyce sprang up at the same instant. They were ignorant of what the noise presaged, but it was evident that there was something wrong.

They ran out into the open, and stood listening for a moment.

"We'd better bolt," suggested Corbyn.

It was no time to hesitate. They clambered over the balcony rail, let go together, and dropped into the darkness.

Swift shadows darted on them as they fell. They fought and struggled vainly. The trap was too well set, and they were prisoners.

A crash and a cloud of dust overhead proclaimed that the grating had given way to violent methods. Lights appeared on the balcony. They could hear cries of rage and disappointment.

A lantern flashed on them from above.

"Have you got the blind beggar?" asked a voice very anxiously. "Who are those two?"

"Two strangers. We caught them as they were escaping. No one else has come this way."

"Two of you take them round to the front. The rest stay here, and, if you see the blind man, shoot."

The two captives passively obeyed the order to march. It would have been idle to resist, since every street seemed to be occupied by the enemy. They were thrust through to the inner court and there entrusted to the guard set round their unfortunate fellow-guests, most of whom were protesting volubly,

although quite vainly, against the treatment bestowed on them.

A systematic search was being made throughout the building. No single nook or cranny was left unexplored. Even the well was plumbed to make quite sure that no one might be lurking in it. The portly proprietress wrung her hands as she heard the crash of breaking glass, the splintering of woodwork, and the crone who had first encountered the intruders kept up a ceaseless comment on their conduct and its consequences.

"The poor blind beggar will have a pretty bill to pay," she cried in her cracked voice, "after these sons of Satan have finished."

"Be silent, hag!" a soldier shouted, bringing the barrel of his carbine across her shoulders. She shrank back, and subsided into senile mutterings.

"Here's our good friend Gonzalez," Allardyce observed in a low tone, as that worthy came into the courtyard.

"He's slipped the net," said he sourly to an approaching officer, who nodded sulky confirmation.

"We'll close the inn and leave some men about. If he comes back, they'll nab him. Meanwhile we'll march these cattle to the *carcel* and keep them there until we catch him."

He had raised his voice, so that all could hear his last remark, and it was greeted with grievous outcry. He was deaf to all appeals for pity. The half-clad inmates of the Golden Eagle were hustled

out into the street. The soldiery was recalled from its congenial task of mischievous destruction. Due disposition was made for ambushing their quarry in case he should return, and then the troop ambled off with the innocent sufferers crowding along on foot in its centre.

With them Gonzalez did not for the moment concern himself further. There would be time enough to have them establish their identity within the prison walls.

He counted them in bulk and cursed the whining crone for her slow progress as she hobbled past him.

"Step out, beldame!" he ordered brutally. "Move those old bones of thine, or I shall have a lance-point prick thee forward."

"Pity! Have pity—*por el amor de dios!*" she groaned, but managed to mend her pace.

The prison of La Boca was located at the landward end of the town and stood alone on a square ill-kept ground which, during the day, served as stance for the country-carts that brought garden-stuff to the market. By night it was practically deserted save for some such belated vehicle.

Escort and prisoners drew up before the frowning gates. There was some delay while the officials were being called from their beds, the guard within being obviously suspicious of the presence of an armed force there at such an hour.

The troopers had dismounted and were making up for the enforced silence of the preceding hour,

while Gonzalez and their officer parleyed from horseback with those on the parapet above them.

The leading files had drawn to one side, leaving free passage gateward for the prisoners. No one interfered when the old kitchen-woman went limping that way, for no one noticed her.

The two men sitting in their saddles, talking, with uplifted chins, to the almost invisible occupants of the loopholes overhead heard nothing but the sound of their own voices.

The old dame stopped between the haunches of their horses, drew a deep breath, and, springing with an energy astonishing in one of her years, grasped at their collars, pulled them to the earth, half-choking them. Their heads met with a crash which stunned them and they fell with one wild cry.

The frightened horses started apart, but the crone held fast by the cantle of one saddle and Gonzalez had not let go his reins.

She set foot on his chest and his fingers relaxed as she leaped. The flutter of her skirts further alarmed the animal she had bestrode. It bolted with the bit between its teeth, cleaving an easy passage through the encircling throng.

Upon the instant there was panedmonium. Gonzalez, who had risen to his feet, was screaming orders and imprecations before his bewildered retainers could understand what had happened. Two or three men mounted and made off after the fugitive. He flew at those who remained, striking

at them with his bare hands, kicking and cursing like one demented.

The women prisoners were making hysterical outcry, savage men's voices shouted from every quarter. In the midst of the uproar the prison-governor appeared on a turret, while from another suddenly shone a blazing cluster of lights.

Gonzalez turned on him with bitter words, and, while they argued and recriminated, those below were once more free to draw breath.

"It wouldn't have been wise to attempt escape," Allardyce whispered to Corbyn. "We would have been sure to get separated in the dark."

"The other fellow has gotten away all right," his friend objected; "but, of course, he had his plans laid. I wonder who he was?"

"I tell you, señor Governor," Gonzalez cried, "that this night's work will cost you dearly. His Excellency will not be grateful to the man who sleeps so soundly that our prisoners escape.

"And as to you, señor Teniente," he turned to the astonished officer, who had at length recovered his perpendicular and was shambling shamefacedly toward him, "your swinish incapacity unfits you for a uniform. Get to your post! Don't stand there staring! It is sufficient for one day that you have let the blind man go again, that the leader of the American filibuster is now at large in San Benito. Yes, that was he. Don't stand there staring! but march your remaining prisoners in."

CHAPTER VIII

CHALLONER'S CONSCIENCE.

IN the small hours of the morning Challoner, the correspondent, sat down at his desk within the lonely dwelling on the height beyond La Boca to concoct his daily cable for the *Wireless*. He had transmitted to New York before setting forth for the summit of the Pass full details as to the tragedy of the *Hilario*, and there was little of importance to chronicle now. He leaned back in his chair, looking reflectively at the ceiling, and his right hand fell purposefully upon the butt of a revolver hidden among a heap of papers where it would be most convenient.

An aged woman stepped stealthily across the porch outside and stood for a moment at the open door, staring in upon him. Her skirts were stained with travel, she was breathing heavily. In one corner of her mouth was a cigarette.

"Don't move or you're a dead man," Challoner said suddenly in Spanish: and his visitor stood motionless in the compelling presence of the levelled pistol.

"You're still a woman-hater, eh, Quiff?" she

asked with a coy simper, and the correspondent shifted his glance from the small mirror on the cornice opposite the doorway to her wrinkled face.

"My sainted aunt!" he cried, springing to his feet. "You're a holy horror, Meggs! You frightened me, and that's a fact. Why didn't you speak, confound you! I might have shot you.

"Come in, and close the door. What the deuce are you doing here in that rig-out? Sit down and tell me things. Will you have beer or whiskey?"

He shook hands very warmly with his venerable-looking visitant, and drew a chair forward.

"You should have been an actor, Jerry. Your make-up's a marvel. Seems to me, though, that I've seen these togs of yours before."

Meggs laughed delightedly.

"I shouldn't wonder," said he, covering his ankles with great modesty as he sat down. "They're your own, Quiff. I stopped in here and made free with your professional wardrobe on my way to town. The panel was partly open. I left a note for you with your man. Didn't you get it?"

"I've just come in from the Pass," Challoner explained, "and didn't wake Miguel. Did he give you my scrawl?"

"Yes, and I made a bee-line for the Golden Eagle, but they had no word there of my two friends. I've had the time of my life to-night, Quiff. Some local Sherlock Holmes has got wise in a hurry, and I've been dodging the entire army of San Benito since

then. I'm going to have a fat part in whatever drama we're hired for, and —— ”

“Hold hard, hold hard,” ordered Challoner. “Let's have the anecdote right end up. Begin at the beginning. All I know up to now is what you told me in your last letter—that you were coming down here with twenty other devils worse than yourself to seek trouble in San Benito. What's the idea of it all? Remember, I haven't seen you since we chewed biltong together with Brother Boer. That's where you start your story. What have you been up to since then?”

“Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” said Meggs concisely. “I've been about the world as usual, Quiff, same as yourself except that no one pays me for my correspondence.”

He hesitated a little, and spoke more soberly.

“Six months ago I happened to be in London. Went over to play polo again, and—I met a girl there.”

He shot a surreptitious glance at his friend, but Challoner was not smiling. There was that in Meggs' voice now which it was not good to hear.

“She turned me down, and that left me in little pieces. I fell hard, Quiff, and a long way. I thought I had fallen straight through to hell till I found that I had only gotten as far on the way there as New Orleans. When I came to my senses I found that I had acquired a friend, by the name of Barr—Barr of Mobile—and that he had talked

me into taking command of an expedition he wanted to send down here, a most mysterious picnic with twenty men, under sealed orders not to be opened until we should land. I had jumped at the chance of getting killed off with decency and despatch, but afterwards I grew somewhat shy of involving my twenty comrades in any such enterprise. Corbyn and Allardyce came on ahead to find out how the land lies, but the rest of us got our marching orders earlier than I expected and here we are at their heels. We swam the horses ashore at the back of Punta Gorda last evening, and landed twenty of the trimmest fighting-men that ever pulled trigger together. It would do your heart good, Quiff, to see 'em shift to *Boot and saddle*. I only wish you —— ”

“Let up, let up, now, Jerry,” the correspondent interposed. “You know quite well that I’m here for the *Wireless*, first and foremost and all the time. Don’t aggravate me with any of your sinful propositions. If I were free it would be a different matter. But my hands are tied. I can do little more for you than I have done. And that’s nothing at all.”

He spoke morosely, and Meggs understood the temptation that comes now and then to the man of action engaged in peaceful pursuits.

“Don’t fret about it,” said the latter more lightly. “It’s my conviction that Barr of Mobile has sold us a full-sized pup. I don’t think we’ll spend any cartridges in San Benito. It will be home, sweet home for us just as soon as we’ve extracted our

two friends from the local jail. Did I tell you that Corbyn and Allardyce have been locked up already?"

Challoner held up a hand.

"We'll stick to the main line, meantime, Jerry. How did the orders read when you opened them, and where's your fighting force?"

"The boys are holding the fort pending further instructions from me, in the tall timber behind the Point. My orders chiefly consist of a fat commission appointing me colonel commanding the body-guard of some sharp called Sariol, *Presidente de la Republica*, and a broad hint that I'd better make quick connection with that same gentleman wherever he may be, in case some other patriot tramples on me before I get there."

"If you could have told me that in time I might have saved you a useless journey," said Challoner. "Sariol is not yet President, nor do I think he ever will be. Barr of Mobile may have meant well enough, but he's backing the wrong horse. I'll tell you now how things stand here to-day.

"Ybarra's President. There's a strong revolution on foot against him and at the back of it, but safely hidden, stands Sariol. They planned a big coup which was to have come off no later than yesterday, and, had it been successful, your commission would have been worth a little more than it is, which also is nothing at all.

"The steamer on which Corbyn and Allardyce came from New York brought the cream of these

conspirators, with arms and ammunition enough to supply the whole sea-coast. And that was their scheme. They intended to capture Ybarra here in La Boca, proclaim your friend Sariol president, and carry their operations on from this side of the mountains. La Boca is the key to the country, and the thing was well enough thought out, but the Tiger was too astute to let them catch him napping. He sank the steamer with all on board as soon as she entered the harbour. Every one was below but your two lieutenants, and they escaped by a very thin hair's-breadth, I can assure you.

"Ybarra knows you are here, but not your purpose, and Sariol will be the first to disclaim all knowledge of you if you claim acquaintance with him. There are spies everywhere, and the best thing you can do, Jerry, is to quit. You hold a losing hand, and you're up against a bad gang. I've seen them deal with surrendered prisoners after a fight, and—it wasn't a square deal, Jerry. It made me sick to look on."

He broke off abruptly, and Meggs nodded.

"They're the devil's children in that way," said he, "and I'll keep my twenty out of their hands, after I get back Corbyn and Allardyce."

"How have they managed to get themselves into hot water already?" Challoner inquired gravely.

"I got them into it," Meggs explained. "It was this way. When I got your tip that they were at the Golden Eagle I was in a hurry to get in touch

with them. I slipped into a suit of rags I found here, stuck a fringe of beard on my chin, a white wig on my head and tripped along into town as the old blind beggar. But I drew blank in Eighteenth of June Street."

"That's very queer," remarked Challoner, "but perhaps they went on the buzz together instead of going straight there. The town was up late last night."

"Well, anyhow, I had a chat with the fat old frau at the Golden Eagle, and won her heart by leaving a wad of bills with her as a guarantee of good faith. As things turned out, I'm glad that I had that happy thought—but wait a bit. From there I went on a prowl round town, in hope of picking them up if they were still doing the sights, and nearly got picked up myself by the police. I had a deuce of a time dodging them, and I'm more than half inclined to think that they knew more about me even then than I gave them credit for."

"I tell you there are spies everywhere," Challoner repeated. "The fellow at the head of the Secret Service is far too clever to let even a blind beggar pass. If you ever run across him—his name's Gonzalez—keep both eyes very wide open. But go on."

"They chased me round till I got tired, and I made a bold break for the Golden Eagle again, just in time to see our two night-hawks get out of a cab at the gate. And, as luck would have it, up bobbed

a bold *vigilante* at the street corner as I was on the point of following them. I set off down the street rather than have him think that I had anything to do with the Golden Eagle, he after me like a little ferret with his small-sword and revolver all ready for argument. It cost me a lot of time and trouble to give him the slip, but I managed it in the end and once more got back to the inn.

"The fat lady had put my friends in a safe place, and they'd made it safer by shutting me out with an iron grating. Every one was in bed by that time, and I was fumbling away at the bolts by myself, when I heard the cheering sound of horsemen in bulk approaching. I can tell you I reached the outer gate on a record, got the bars up, and was back in the kitchen before they began to knock. My whiskers and wig went into the fire, I slipped this confounded skirt on and a shawl over my head, caught the *patrona* on her way to open the gate and did that for her, my own way, ten minutes later.

"There was a whole troop of cavalry there, and what they wanted was me. They got me, but they didn't know that. They got every soul in the Golden Eagle, including Corbyn and Allardyce, who had made a bold bid to escape but were caught by the cordon outside. And they marched us all off to prison. I got away by the skin of my teeth at the prison-gate, and I'm going back presently to excavate the other two. I didn't dare to disclose my identity to them lest I should spoil my own plan.

And if we had all three been laid on the shelf it would have been a black business for them and for me and for the twenty men in the woods."

"You were wise," said Challoner briefly. "And even now you've got a very hard row to hoe, Jerry. I don't see how—— But, hold on. I may be able to give you some sound advice, after all. I really shouldn't be showing you these little tricks of the trade, but I'll have to compound with my conscience this time. Listen!"

A faint click-click came from the rug at his feet. He stooped and lifted that. The dot and dash of a field-telegraph receiver became more distinctly audible.

It rattled off a message in the old Morse code, which they both read mechanically and by ear. Gonzalez was reporting to the President at Alta Cruz the capture and subsequent escape of the chief of that band of filibusters which had lately landed in San Benito, the lodgement in La Boca prison of the American, Corbyn, and his confederate: with comments and suggestions. He was of opinion that the filibusters had some connection with Corbyn, and ventured to advise their extermination forthwith.

"A clever devil that!" said Challoner as the instrument ceased to speak. "Ybarra would be ill off without him."

"He'll be ill off, then, if I ever run across Gonzalez," Meggs answered angrily. "I'll wring his

neck for him, in return for his cleverness. I'd like to hear what orders come back from Alta Cruz."

"There's nothing passes that we can't hear if we want to," the correspondent assured him. "The wire runs right overhead. That's one reason why I took this shack."

"You'd better get into some other clothes now, Jerry. You're very fetching in these togs, but ——"

Meggs got up, grinning.

"It's a good thing I'm old and ugly," he replied darkly, "or I might not have found my disguise so effective. But you needn't rub it in like that, Quiff. If I had been an Adonis, like Corbyn or Allardyce, I'd have been ——"

"You'll look a good deal handsomer after you've washed your face," Challoner interrupted. "Off you go. I've got to telephone the cable office in La Boca with my bulletin. Then we'll take turn about sitting over the instrument here and sleeping. I haven't been to bed for two days, and there's daylight already."

"I'll stay with you till it's dark again before I move on," said Meggs. "You needn't be afraid to keep me. The uniform I left here will serve to stave off any troublesome inquirers."

"Will your men wait quietly?" asked Challoner.

"Nothing short of a ton of dynamite will move them before I get back to camp. They're the straight brand, Quiff. I'd trust 'em from here to Hades."

The storm which had been brewing all night broke at noon, and saved the little dwelling on the cliff-face not a few inconvenient visitors. Dusk had already fallen ere a police patrol came clambering up the path, which was like a water-fall, and found the correspondent in a suit of pink pajamas, amicably chowing coca-leaves in company with a mud-be-splattered captain of cavalry. The policemen did not deem it prudent to intrude on that dignitary, and went off gratefully after partaking of rum supplied them, at his master's order, by Miguel: who was both willing and able to assure them positively that he had seen no lurking fugitive in the vicinity that day, the day before, or any other day. And, an hour later, Meggs left on horseback, unseen.

He took to the shore, cantering over wet sand below high-water mark till he reached Punta Gorda, where he turned inland to where his sodden camp lay on the summit of a low rise in the forest there.

"Get saddled up, men," he said quietly, and sat in his saddle waiting while the drenched troopers gladly obeyed.

The rain had ceased, the sky was clear again, and all the stars were shining as they rode forth after him, but underfoot a long canal of liquid mud had taken the place of the dusty highroad to La Boca. It made soft going for the horses. They travelled easily and drew up at the prison-gate early in the evening. Their leader answered the sentries' chal-

lenge, and in due course the governor appeared on the parapet.

"You're before your time, *señor capitán*," he grumbled sourly. "The telegram said ten o'clock."

"It will be well to start before," the officer replied in a gruff growl, "if we are to reach Alta Cruz before dawn. The roads are barely passable after the rain."

"I'll bring the prisoners out, then," the guardian of the gaol announced. "Have your men ready; those *gringos* seem to be more slippery than eels!"

A wicket in the outer gate swung back and four armed men brought forth two others unarmed, who looked about them hopelessly.

The cloaked troopers of the escort had their carbines drawn, there were two horses standing with empty saddles in the forefront.

Corbyn was lifted into one before he could protest, and Allardyce, accepting the situation philosophically, swung himself into the other. The escort closed up round them, without a word.

"Sign this receipt, please," said the governor in the gateway. "Don't be in such a hurry, *señor capitán*. I have the rules and regulations to comply—— Hey! Halt. Come back. *Por dios, hombre*, wait a ——"

His voice rose to a shriek, although he might have saved his breath for all the attention that was paid him by the rapidly vanishing body of horsemen.

He was afraid to fire on a uniformed force. There seemed to be nothing practical that he could do.

He flew into an apoplectic passion, and, lacking other object, vented it on his astonished subordinates, accusing them of connivance in an infernal plot to work his ruin. And when, at ten o'clock, a second party appeared to demand the custody of the same prisoners, he sent his deputy out to display a duly forged receipt for them, refusing stubbornly to rise from his sudden sick-bed or to see any one whomsoever.

The pace at which the troop was travelling, the showers of mud the horses threw up prevented any conversation between the prisoners. Meggs, at its head, kept onward at a canter, and did not deem it wise to hold speech with his friends until they should be free from fear of observation by those spies of whom Challoner had warned him. He held a straight course for his camping-ground, and, not till they had reached that and heard his voice raised in crisp command, did Allardyce and Corbyn realise what had befallen them.

It was a joyful trio that sat down, ten minutes later, beside a blazing fire in a safe cranny of the rocks to dry their mud-soaked clothing and exchange histories. The camp cook soon had hot food ready for them and the others. The horses were munching their oats contentedly. Pickets had been posted on arrival. Warmth and security were doubly grateful there in the damp and darkness, after the

hardships they had undergone. And, after their separate adventures had all been recounted, the failure of Barr's bold project and their consequent plight fully explained and discussed, they fell silent for a brief space, smoking contentedly, listening to the men's low laughter, the sough of the wind through the trees, looking up at the twinkling stars.

Then Corbyn laid his pipe aside, and told Meggs of Beatriz Ybarra: in very few words, but none the less fully. He spoke between set teeth of the fault which he felt to be his, and because of which she was now at the mercy of one who knew none. Meggs sat listening attentively, his face inscrutable.

"And so, you see, I can't go back home with you, Jerry," Corbyn concluded. "My place is here. I may be too late, but, if I am, I'll find some means to settle scores with that—with Ybarra. I must make for Alta Cruz in the morning."

Neither of the others had any comment to make. Allardyce had already declared to Corbyn his definite and irrevocable intention of sharing with him whatever further trouble might be forthcoming, and was not addicted to empty reiteration. He went on smoking, a faint frown showing upon his forehead in the red firelight. Meggs seemed to have no remark to make. He got up presently, knocked his pipe out on his boot-heel, and sauntered off into the surrounding darkness.

CHAPTER IX

ALLARDYCE ACTS VERY CLUMSILY

GERALD MEGGS stood alone in the darkness under the roof-like branches of the thick forest. His ears were deaf to its night noises and he could see nothing. His back was towards the bivouac he had come from.

His hands were clenched, his head bent, his features working, Leaning against an invisible tree-trunk he let his forehead fall in the crook of his elbow and gave vent to a stifled groan. And thus he stayed for a time, motionless, making no further sound, though his brow was wet with the stress he was suffering, fighting the fiercest temptation he would ever face. The devil behind his shoulder was dinning into his ears the devilish axiom that "All's fair in love and war," and better men than Gerald Meggs have succumbed to such teaching.

When he returned to the camp-fire the other two were still stitting there, silent, staring into the embers. Allardyce looked up at him, but dropped his eyes instantly. Meggs sat down in the shadow, and spoke as steadily as he could.

"Phil," he said, "I didn't know that you had any

understanding with Beatriz Ybarra. I didn't know she belonged to this part of the world. I thought she was an American. She told me her home was in Washington."

Corbyn turned towards him in quick surprise, and their glances crossed for a moment, but Meggs went on before the other could utter a word.

"It was she whom I asked to marry me, Phil. I—I didn't know, you see, and it cut deep at first to find out that you're the other man. But I want to shake hands with you now, and—and wish you luck. I—I want to stand in with you, if you'll let me."

His voice shook ever so slightly as he made renunciation for his friend's sake of his dearest dream, of the fighting chance there was left to win even at the eleventh hour the woman who was all the world held for him. He had the men and the money to succour her and so forward his suit at a moment when it could not but be heard with much in his favour, a moment when his rival was almost out of the running. In his simple code of honour he had found no room for the theory that all's fair in either love or war. Gerald Meggs was a modern young man and no great philosopher, but what he did he would do with clean hands, whether in war or love.

Corbyn had risen in his astonishment. He could surmise how much it must have cost Meggs to come to such a conclusion, and was at first bewildered by

his magnanimity. All he could ask for himself was just that same fighting chance his friend was willing to sacrifice. He did not know that, had he been in Meggs' place, he could have brought himself to give it up, and, when he realised the extent of the other's generosity, he could scarce find words with which to express his feelings.

"Jerry," he said, wringing the hand held out to him, "you're a better man than I am, but—you understand. It's for her sake that I must do the best I can, and—I know you'll bear me no grudge."

They separated, somewhat shamefacedly after the Anglo-Saxon manner when any emotion shows on the surface, and Allardyce also rose. He clapped Meggs over the shoulder.

"You're a good little chap, Jerry," he remarked. "You and I will have just as much fun and fewer responsibilities the way you've fixed it."

"You've never seen her, Allardyce," poor Meggs returned impulsively, and kicked a flaming log aside so that the fire died down. Then he heaved a deep sigh, unashamed, filled his pipe, and sat down again.

"Corbyn," he said more calmly, "I'm at your orders. All I ask is that you'll take over command of the men. You know the country, and—I'll explain to them."

Corbyn sighed, too.

"I can't afford to employ men, Jerry," he answered vexedly. "I wish I could, but—if wishes were horses beggars would ride."

"I didn't think you would have said that to me," said Meggs in a hurt tone. "Am I not to be allowed to help, not only you, but her? Surely you're not going to let any silly scruples of that sort stand between her and safety. If you are, I tell you flatly that I'll go on myself till I see her out of this cursed country. I've far more money than I know what to do with, and—that's what's the matter with me. Make up your mind in a hurry. We've got to march in ten minutes if we want to cross the Pass to-night."

"You must let Jerry chip in, old chap," Allardyce agreed, and Meggs nodded gratefully to him. "What we want is to get Miss Ybarra clear of that savage's clutch. You can't afford any personal scruples at present. Call up the men, Jerry, and let's find out how many we can count on."

Corbyn was still further overwhelmed by this proof of Meggs' single-heartedness, but could not gainsay the common sense of Allardyce's contention. With two such friends at his back and a fighting force behind them much might be done that would be, humanly speaking, impossible otherwise. He had no option but to accept all they offered, in the hope that he might one day be able to pay them in part the debt he must thus incur for the sake of Beatriz.

"You two must get into fancy-dress first," said Meggs, and from some crevice produced a parcel containing two uniforms.

"Hope they'll fit. I had them made in Broadway along with the others. They're the correct thing. Barr gave me full directions, so that we might cut a dash here without delay, and now they'll help us along famously." His spirits were rising at the prospect of action. He helped them deftly with belt and buckle, till both stood fully dressed as officers of San Benitan cavalry, straight and smart in as yet unstained blue and gold. Two of the four stars on his own shoulder-straps he transferred to Corbyn's.

"Allardyce and I take lieutenant's rank," said he, "and you're in command now, Phil. I'll serve you faithfully."

Corbyn could only wring his hand again. His own heart was too full of gratitude to let him speak unmoved. And then Meggs called the men together.

He told them briefly how and why the expedition for which they had enlisted had turned out a fiasco, and that they were therefore free to lay down their arms and leave the country with a month's pay and the price of the homeward passage. Then he outlined the undertaking before Corbyn, explaining its risks clearly, warning them as to the consequences failure would most assuredly entail on the survivors. They listened gravely.

He stepped back beside Allardyce, a pace to rear of Corbyn.

"That's all I have to say, boys," he concluded, "and—this is my captain. I'm going with him."

Corbyn returned their glances steadily. It was not the first time that he had called for volunteers to share a desperate risk.

"I'm Philip Corbyn," he said shortly. "You've heard what sort of work I have ahead of me. If any of you care to join me, talk the thing over for five minutes and then let me know."

He was about to turn back to the fire that they might have full liberty of speech between themselves, when a voice cried from among them, "Put Mike McGuire's name down, Captain Corbyn, sor."

He halted, and went forward holding out his hand.

"Mike," he said, "I'm more than glad to meet you here. But this may turn out a harder pull than San Juan Ridge, and it was none so easy. You know how pleased I'll be to have you with me, but ——"

"I'm goin', sor," said Mike stubbornly. "I didn't come down here for my health, nor none of the others didn't, neither. It's no use, Captain Corbyn, sor. You can't frighten us off our fun. We're all goin', each mother's son of us, and where you lead we'll follow. Isn't that right, boys?"

"That's right, Mike," chorused a dozen voices, and Allardyce smiled contentedly. He had been half afraid that Meggs and Corbyn were laying too much stress on the weak points of their project.

"Every man has full liberty to act as he thinks best," Corbyn finished. "There's a New York

steamer sails from La Boca to-morrow. I start across the mountains in ten minutes from now, and there will be no turning back from beyond the Pass. Those who mean to go with me will saddle up in a hurry. Three men must take word out to the pickets and give them the same chance."

The gathering broke up speedily and he turned to his friends with a glad face.

"That's a good crowd you've recruited, Jerry," he said, and Meggs nodded cordial assent. "Mike McGuire's a host in himself. He was with me in Cuba."

Meggs nodded again. "I remember him," he responded. "He speaks some Spanish, too. It wouldn't be bad to make him troop sergeant."

"We will," agreed Corbyn, who had the same idea in his mind. "And now about our plan of campaign. It's understood that our sole object is to get Miss Ybarra safely beyond San Benito. Don't forget that her life isn't safe while she is within her cousin's reach. He's desperately hard up, and she's very wealthy. That's wherein the chief risk to her lies.

"If any of us fall out the others must go on. One of the three should surely get through, and in that respect we must trust to Providence. If you two will pose as prisoners till we're well over the mountains, I think we can manage to pass the garrison at the summit, and then we'll be fairly started. Have you any wire-cutters in your equipment, Jerry?"

"Every man has a pair on his saddle."

"Good. Let's get mounted."

Corbyn's voice had a very different ring in it now. He was once more a soldier holding responsible rank, cool, alert, and ready.

They found their horses awaiting them, and the men drawn up in line. Corbyn counted off seventeen and there were three on picket. Not one of them would avail himself of the New York steamer. He called McGuire out and told him of his promotion, which seemed to meet with his comrades' entire approval, and, in a few seconds more, the force moved off complete.

A canter took them to the mountain-road, where they turned upwards at a walk, Corbyn leading the way, Meggs and Allardyce in the midst of the men, hatless, in muddy cloaks. It was a long climb to the summit, but the horses were fresh and had a breathing-spell each time they stopped to cut the telegraph wire, which was done in several places. In time they reached the first of the enemy's outposts, on the seaward side of the Pass. A harsh cry rang out from the rocks above, and Corbyn halted his force for an anxious moment.

"Friends," he cried back, and the countersign was demanded. Meggs had obtained that from Challoner, and had already made use of it in approaching the prison. Corbyn gave it without hesitation, and, "Pass, friends," said the sentry, his duty done.

Word of their coming had reached the camp ere they did, and they were halted at the main-guard by the subaltern in charge, a sulky boy who had but lately realised that it takes more than brass buttons to make a soldier.

"Escort with prisoners for Alta Cruz; also despatches for His Excellency," Corbyn told him in lisping Spanish.

"You're one of Von Rudolf's imported swash-bucklers, I suppose," said the youth with quite unconscious insolence and scanning closely the cloaked figure looking down upon him.

"Clear the road and let me pass," the man on horseback answered briefly. "On my way back I'll perhaps find time to teach you how to address your superiors.

"Stand to one side there, men; and you, sir,"—turning again to the bewildered scion of San Benito—"see that you keep a sharp lookout towards the town. If any troop of horse attempts to reach you from that side you will do well to hold them. Be much more courteous when I come again.

"I give you the good-night. Detachment! Walk—march. Trot."

He rode on, smiling grimly to himself, and the dark chain of riflemen gave way before him, while their responsible superior stood gaping after the departing company in a most grievous state of indecision. It was too late, however, to interfere. He cursed his own subordinates with great fervour

and fluency for the especial reason that they had not stood still to be ridden over, and then retired to his tent, muttering.

Half way down hill Corbyn stopped again and two of his men swarmed nimbly up the tall poles planted along their route. A shrill, metallic *ping-g-g* and a great length of wire went whistling into space. Again, at the foot, he left a gap in the communication between La Boca and the capital, and then they set out across the plain beyond which lay Alta Cruz.

"That isolates the Summit completely," he told Meggs, who was once more riding at his right hand. "They aren't likely to have a heliograph handy, and it's a long ride either way."

Each time they stopped he found work for the wire-cutters, and, when day broke, they all drew off the road to rest and feed the horses within a clump of trees upon a knoll commanding all approaches.

Corbyn and Allardyce dismounted stiffly, but, although the former was still enduring pain and inconvenience from his two days' old wound, neither would sleep, as Meggs suggested after they had breakfasted on cold meat and biscuits, washed down with a somewhat scanty supply of brackish water. They were too busy taking stock of their troopers, and found all twenty thoroughly to their liking. Minus their military cloaks, in the smart uniform Von Rudolf had designed for his crack cavalry, they were as dashing in action and appearance as any connoisseur could wish. Corbyn had found a college

friend in one, and while he laughed and chatted with him Allardyce and Meggs got out their maps to study the lie of the country.

"Well, what's the programme now?" demanded Meggs as he came back to where they lay stretched on the grass with the sheets spread before them. "We're close to Alta Cruz, now."

"Alta Cruz is only a league ahead," Corbyn answered. "We'll lie here until noon—the city's sound asleep then—and trust to luck to find out whether Ybarra's at the palace. If he's gone on to the Golden Horseshoe, as I half fear he may, we follow. We must strike quickly."

"How would it do if I rode in alone and found out what's doing?" asked Allardyce eagerly, and his commander cogitated.

"It would do well enough—if you got back," replied that strategist, "but I'm afraid the risk is too great. None of the others know colloquial Spanish, although several can speak it well enough to get about, and—I can't spare you. We may surmise that Ybarra has taken all precautions against solitary strangers: he's heard already that I'm on his track, but I don't think he knows I've got an army with me." He smiled with kindly eyes on the handful of adventurers about him. "No, on the whole," he said, "I think you'd better not."

Once again before mid-day the horses were watered and fed and rubbed down, and the men had a leisurely lunch. Thereafter they went on gladly,

for they anticipated trouble. Corbyn had told them that, if President Ybarra were in Alta Cruz, there might presently be excitement to burn.

Allardyce, feeling more like himself in his new uniform, which, greatly to his satisfaction, fitted him almost without a crease, was sent on as advance-guard with two men to add dignity to his position. His duty was to pave the way, give warning of any obstacle which might prove insurmountable, and act as the eyes of the main body, which followed at short interval.

Years had passed by since he had ridden on such an errand, but his blood warmed; the old familiar zest that rises only where life faces death by choice and not by chance set his veins tingling, and tickled his interest in existence.

"I wouldn't have missed this little jaunt for a million," he said softly, to himself, and laughed aloud even as he reined back before a levelled rifle. A Cossack post concealed in a dry ditch at a safe distance from the city had halted him, and there was little time to parley.

"Urgent despatches for His Excellency. The countersign 'St. James of the Sierra.' Stand back and don't delay us," he cried authoritatively, and, shaking his horse into a hand-gallop again, went on his way, but laughing no longer. As he topped the wide depression in which the ditch ran, he could see ahead of him the city gate of Alta Cruz, and squarely in its centre, looming large against the light beyond, a heavy siege-gun stood, its evil eye

looking directly down the road that he must travel. The gun-crew was at quarters, with the lanyard stretched. It seemed that they had seen the advancing force and meant to take no chances with it.

He could not hesitate, and kept the pace up till he reached the outer picket, strung across his path. A pompous officer of infantry behind the firing-line bade him explain his reckless haste, and he told the same story which had passed the post beyond.

Corbyn held his hand and came up slowly, halting his men in two long ranks with the width of the road between, to find his subaltern engaged in argument.

"It is His Excellency's order," snapped the fat foot-soldier, "and—— Yes, he went on to the Golden Horseshoe this forenoon. Haste or no haste, I must have all your names and personal descriptions before you pass. It is His Excellency's order."

"I have the troop-roll," said Corbyn patiently. "If you have paper handy it will save time to copy it entire."

The fussy guardian of the gates waddled away to fetch that, and Allardyce, dismounting, passed through the screen of riflemen behind him. They did not dare to stop an officer, and their superior had given no order either way. That busy bee came bustling back, carrying sheets of foolscap and a fountain-pen, but by that time the Englishman, bridle in hand, had sauntered, staring, as far as the group behind the gun. These had relaxed a little their attentive attitude. The non-commissioned

officer in charge saluted him respectfully. The men drew back a little as he strolled about their piece, and, when he took a squinting peep along the sights, grinned furtively as gunners will when an amateur plays the professional.

It was no more than a mere slip which caused the accident. His spur caught and he stumbled, catching at him who held the lanyard as he fell.

A terrible explosion shook the gate-house to its brick and plaster parapet. A charge of canister went screaming down the road between two ranks of plunging horses and demented men.

For thirty seconds there was pandemonium, inside and out.

Corbyn and his command had half divined the purpose which had taken Allardyce among the enemy. They watched with bated breaths while he made sure that it was safe to fire between their ranks, and no man lost his seat when the crash came.

They drove their frantic horses through the smoke before the terror-stricken linesmen had recovered sight and hearing. Allardyce had clung to his bridle and been dragged clear. He got the reins right and was already in his saddle when Corbyn reached his side.

Meggs came next and then their troopers streamed in. And while the steeples of the city rocked and rang to the wild tocsin of alarm the twenty-three rode hell for leather into the heart of the hornets' nest they had stirred up so efficaciously.

CHAPTER X

THE GOLDEN HORSESHOE

THE city of the golden spires, as Alta Cruz is fondly called by its inhabitants, was sparkling in the morning sunshine when two dusty travelling-carriages drew up before the great pink marble palace which looks loftily across the Plaza Principal.

Dennis O'Dare helped Fifi from the first of these, and the assiduous Von Rudolf stood beside the other while the President alighted. Then Beatriz came forth, without availing herself of the hand extended by her relative.

They all went up the steps together, the guard presenting arms, while such of the populace as were already astir and had happened to be passing through the square peered in upon them from behind the gilded railings, gaping at the spectacle but without outward sign of approval; for the Tiger's yoke pressed full heavily on the common people. But, as they reached the pillared portico and there came running forth to greet them one who had been watching from within, a cry of "*Viva Sariol!*" resounded from the background, and President Ybarra bit his lip till the blood came.

The black frown faded from his face, however, as he shook hands with the effusive newcomer, and, turning to his cousin, he said ceremoniously: "I have the honour to present to you don Quentin Sariol, Vice-President of San Benito and my most valued friend."

"I kiss your hands; I am your humble servant," declared don Quentin with breathless volubility. "What news do you bring, Ybarra? There are strange rumours in the air. Pray, pardon my abruptness, señorita. We live in stirring times; and it is for His Excellency's welfare that I ——"

"What is the latest from La Boca?" asked the President, cutting his explanation short. "Has any message reached you from the Pass?"

"The wires are down," said Sariol, without attempting to suppress the malice in his voice. "There will be no more word from La Boca in the mean time, I'm afraid."

Ygnacio Ybarra glared at him, but made no other comment on the unwelcome information.

"Order fresh horses, Von Rudolf," he snapped over his shoulder, and the General transmitted the command to an adjacent orderly in a tone of indifferent contempt. He was no lackey, and, although it pleased him for the present to ride at the head of the presidential lifeguards, he was ready and willing to show this South American savage that it was not a menial who wore his livery.

Nor was His Excellency slow to realise that he

had made a false step. "I wish you'd take my cousin into breakfast, Karl," he said in a conciliatory tone. "I've business to discuss with Quentin here, and —— off you go. Show these two also where to find food, if you will."

Fifi and O'Dare followed without a word as Beatriz moved forward on Von Rudolf's arm, and, after she had been bestowed within the President's private apartment, he showed them into an adjoining room, wherein was spread a repast the sight of which gladdened Dennis's heart for the sake of his travelling companion.

Von Rudolf shot a swift, questioning glance at Fifi, and withdrew, while O'Dare, who did not approve of his evident interest in her, ministered to all her need solicitously. An onlooker might have inferred that he himself had some especial interest in the sweet-faced girl who accepted his attentions so gratefully.

Ybarra did not waste much time over affairs of state with the Vice-President. He rejoined his cousin within ten minutes, and, having seen that her wants were supplied, dismissed the servants, helping himself from the buffet before he sat down beside her.

"Listen, Beatriz," he said sharply, and she looked up at him in displeased surprise. "There is no time for further trifling, and we must understand each other clearly. Crisis approaches fast—I have not weeks to woo you in—I have no option but to

act. You know that I intend to marry you—and that our union will save San Benito from ——”

She interrupted him with flashing eyes. “Peace, man!” she cried. “Do not perjure your unfortunate country.

“*You* know that I will never marry you—not even in order to fill your empty purse. You know that if you are forced from your dictatorship to-morrow San Benito will be better off than it is to-day.

“I have told you that my troth is pledged elsewhere, and, let me tell you, since there is no time for further trifling, that I hold my least pledge sacred. Would you could say as much!”

His face grew livid as she thus defied him, for heretofore their intercourse had been more guarded, and he had never doubted that, sooner or later, he would be able to achieve his object: and her allegiance to his rival, thus set forth in words for the first time, was in itself sufficient to provoke him to the point of frenzy. Who was the American dog that would dare to beard the Tiger of San Benito in his own den!

“*Cuerpo de dios!*” swore the President. “I’ll free you from your troth, fair cousin—and no least pledge will bind you after I have finished.” He rushed to the door. “Chamberlain! Find Father Agustín and tell him that he is to travel with us. We leave within five minutes. And let the people know that I shall bring a bride back with me from the Golden Horseshoe—the doña Beatriz Ybarra.”

The official who had come at his call went away hastily to carry out his orders: and when the President set forth again with his party there was a priest in their company, much to the dissatisfaction of Dennis O'Dare, who thought that three in a travelling carriage was the worst of company.

All the church-bells were ringing wildly. At the street-corners there were cheering crowds. His Excellency's waning popularity had apparently received a much needed fillip, and that in the nick of time. Could he but succeed in replenishing his empty treasury he might count on their close allegiance.

Quentin Sariol, standing on the palace steps, whence he had sped the couple whose announced engagement had so pleased the fickle populace, laughed with low glee.

"The fool!" he said, speaking thus disrespectfully of his superior. "The stupid fool—to think that such a woman would defy him with mere words!"

A long day's journey took the tired travellers into the far recesses of that great sierra whose volcanic peaks look down on five republics. Von Rudolf, faithful to his task, went with them all the way, and it was well he did so, for in a wild ravine they were beset by a strong body of insurgent infantry, wild mountaineers and no mean marksmen, who, under more efficient leadership, might have put period to this history there and then. After a fierce contest they were driven from their coigns of

vantage with only the death of a dozen government troopers to their credit. The defile was picketed, fresh horses harnessed in the place of those which had fallen under fire, the two women came forth from among the boulders behind which they had found shelter, and the cortège reached its destination without further incident.

The Golden Horseshoe was a vast recess, scooped by some primeval power out of the perpendicular cliff-face which spread for leagues on either side of it, towering farther than the eye could reach. Its only opening looked back towards Alta Cruz, across the intervening hill-tops, and was guarded by a natural rampart-like ridge through which a narrow entrance had been blasted by the hand of man. Above it was the sky, moulded to horseshoe shape by the encircling walls of rocks, all golden-yellow in the evening sunshine.

Within lay a great circular expanse of level pasture, well watered by the mountain stream which showed like a white thread against the precipice five hundred feet above. Sheerly in its centre, rising from the still sea of verdure round it like an island, stood a high, steep, unclimbable plateau, an altar of the gods pushed up entire out of the solid earth, whereon were visible a clump of trees and a cluster of low white buildings.

With a sufficient garrison at the horseshoe heel, where the only possible entrance was, the place must

be quite impregnable. And the garrison, no less than two regiments, was there.

The Golden Horseshoe—the *Herradura de Oro*, as the natives knew it—was Ybarra's property. He had been born there, and meant to die there, when his time should come, fighting to a finish, with the mountains at his back. It was his last resort, the Tiger's lair, a place of terror to the simple country-folk. Strange legends clung to it, and he made the most of them for his own purposes. His flocks and herds all carried the horseshoe brand. He had made a golden horseshoe the sign and seal of his evil career. It was said that the great black stallion he always rode was shod with the precious metal.

O'Dare stared about him uneasily as the great walls seemed slowly to encompass him. "It won't be easy to break out of here," he muttered. "Did you ever see such a place, Fifi?"

"It's very lovely," the girl answered gently, her eyes on the afterglow stealing round the stupendous circle of stone.

"That's true enough," he admitted grudgingly, "but ——" They drew up under the fortress-like shadow of the central height, and there alighted. Ybarra and his cousin followed, and, taking the lead again, slowly ascended a steep winding staircase, cut in the solid rock.

It was a long climb to the top, but once there they could scarcely restrain the exclamations of

amazement which rose unbidden to their lips as the full beauty of the scene displayed itself.

Even Ybarra was touched for an instant as he looked back towards the city of the golden spires, all glittering in the tender sunset beyond the blue hills in between.

"You will be happy here, my Beatriz?" he whispered, but she turned from him with a cold gesture of contempt.

"Never, with you," she answered steadily.

O'Dare had not failed to notice that the stair up which he had just panted was guarded both below and above. He saw the twinkling camp-fires of the garrison on the inner glacis of the ridge that shut the Golden Horseshoe in. But, beyond the single sentry at the top of the steps there seemed to be no armed force on the plateau itself.

"It's safe enough without them," he grumbled disconsolately under his breath. "No visitors without wings will trouble us here. I'd hate to go too near the edge on a dark night."

There were wide unkempt gardens about the white buildings which formed Ybarra's aerial residence, and beyond these a thicket of low trees which sheltered them from any sudden blast.

Once within the walls, however, they soon forgot the strangeness of their situation. Ill-kept as the surroundings were, no detail of comfort was lacking in the interior of the rambling dwelling. Servants were waiting to receive them. All were treated

with consideration. The women were taken charge of by two maids, the President had two men to attend him, and to O'Dare was assigned a single servant. The priest seemed to have betaken himself elsewhere for the time being.

He appeared again at dinner-time, however, and ate with the two others, while Beatriz sat with her cousin at a separate table.

It was a silent meal, and every one was glad when it was over. But, ere they separated for the night, Ybarra took the opportunity to explain his plans and dispositions.

"You know the rules, dom Agustín," he said, turning his chair to face the other table, speaking abruptly, and with finality. "You, señor O'Dare, may learn them from the holy father. My poor house here with all that it contains is at your disposal, so long as you do not transgress them.

"I have come hither to celebrate a wedding—my own, with the doña Beatriz Ybarra. It will take place within my private chapel to-morrow night at this hour. Dom Agustín will wed us, and you two will attend as witnesses.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the good-night."

He rose and, bowing, left them dumbly conscious of their helplessness in his hand. Presently the women went off for the night, weary enough to forget their troubles in sleep.

O'Dare also was fatigued almost beyond en-

durance, but he sat on and smoked a very sound cigar the priest produced, in the hope of extracting some temporal comfort from that source.

Ybarra seemed to have forgotten that neither could understand the other, and the rules of which he had spoken could not therefore be imparted to the stranger within his gates. Dom Agustín knew little English, and O'Dare no Spanish worth speaking. They compounded on such few words of Latin as the actor still carried in his memory, and, having exhausted these, parted with mutual compassion, little the wiser of their intercourse.

Beatriz had shown her cousin, the President, a bold enough front, but she was none the less dismayed by his relentless purpose, and, in her dread that he might carry out the threat he had made so seriously, she had confided to Fifi the secret she had kept locked up in her own heart for so long. She loved Philip Corbyn. She had always loved him; how well and truly she had not realised till too late. And she knew, too, now that he had not slighted her as she had thought, that she had misjudged without trial the man she loved. It hurt her sorely to recall the past.

"I thought he might have called or written when I arrived in New York from Europe," she told her friend, as they paced the weed-grown garden together at an early hour the next morning. "But I feel sure now that he must have done both without my knowing, and my blind pride kept me from seeking

him out till it was too late. Dear, profit by my experience. Be less ungenerous than I have shown myself. Pity me, too, for the heavy penalty of my unfaith."

Fifi's eyes filled with tears, even as she blushed rosily at thought of the tale Dennis O'Dare would assuredly tell her some day; and that at no distant date, her heart whispered.

"You must not blame yourself," she said gently. "You were betrayed, and the plot was a cunning one. It is so difficult to find one's way in the dark."

"I was blind even in broad daylight," Beatriz answered. "I knew that I could trust Phil entirely, and yet I let a petty pique come between us. It's all been my fault, Fifi, and—I don't know what to do now."

She knew what she meant to do if her cousin should carry out his most monstrous threat, but that would not bear speaking about. When the time came she would act, but until then she must seek some escape from the net which was closing about her with every hour the watch at her wrist ticked away.

"Here's Denny," Fifi cried, very much relieved. She had apparently great faith in the resourceful O'Dare. "He'll perhaps have some plan."

But Beatriz did not wait to ask what she felt must be a futile question, and the words with which she greeted him showed the dark trend of her thoughts.

"You've a revolver, haven't you, Mr. O'Dare?"

"I have that," he answered with an assumption of cheerfulness for which he could find but scanty basis inwardly. He had spent a restless night seeking some scheme to help her, and that on which he had at last and reluctantly settled was the outcome of sheerest desperation.

"I have that, Miss Ybarra. But why?"

"Would you—will you let me have it this evening?" she begged impulsively.

He shook his head.

"You must excuse me, but—I may have use for it. If there's any shooting to be done, I'll do it. Let me speak plainly. I'm going to be best man at the ceremony which is to take place to-night, and it will be my painful duty to show cause why the said ceremony should be stopped.

"If you see me stoop to tie my shoe-lace, stand fast—and don't scream."

She shuddered in the sunshine.

"There you are, you see," he added. "You'd be far too nervous ——"

"I meant it for myself—not him," she whispered. "That would be the easier way."

He shook his head decidedly. "I'm going to be best man," he repeated. "Leave all the details to me."

A flash as of distant lightning flared up from above Alta Cruz and was followed by others in swift succession.

"What's that?" Fifi asked, anxious to change the

conversation. She would be brave enough later on, if need be; but it was dreadful to anticipate the near future. "It's been going on all morning."

"Somebody jiggling a shaving-glass in the sun," Dennis answered from the depths of his superior knowledge, and grateful to her for the interruption. "Perhaps they're trying to signal — That's it, to be sure. A heliograph, of course. They're talking to us here—and I only wish I could read it."

"Beatriz!" cried a voice from the verandah behind, and, turning hastily, they saw the President. "Our good friend Quentin Sariol sends word to say that he would willingly attend our wedding, and asks me whether he may come. Shall I say yes?"

"Say yes," O'Dare whispered to her from behind and on the impulse of the moment. He felt that the company of any one from the outside world was to be desired. She nodded, and His Excellency looked well pleased.

"I'm glad you're agreeable," he remarked mockingly, and turned again to where, at one side of the house, a field-telegraphist was receiving and answering the distant signals.

The day passed most drearily, despite strong efforts on every one's part to show at least an outward unconcern. The two girls were haunted by presentiment of the apparently inevitable tragedy that every ruthless hour was bringing nearer. O'Dare was cudgelling his brains for some more certain means to prevent the atrocious wrong Ybarra

was prepared to perpetrate. He knew too well that it would be but by a miracle that he could hope to carry out his wild idea of shooting the wrong-doer down on the steps of the altar. His Excellency was far too clever, too well-accustomed to such methods, to afford him any opportunity of using the ineffectual weapon he had strapped to his ankle lest he should be searched, and, come what might, he could not let the victim of the wrong take her own life.

"I'd throw myself right off this cliff, if it would help her," he reflected wretchedly, "but, as things are, that would be worse than a useless sacrifice. We'll have to wait and see what happens."

The dinner-hour came round in due course, and with it Father Agustín appeared again. The five of them sat down mutely together, and, after coffee had been served, Ybarra rose.

"Come, cousin," he said imperiously, and she followed him without a word, her fair face cold and white as the driven snow.

The priest went next, and after him walked O'Dare, with Fifi leaning heavily on his arm.

"You mustn't faint," he said to her in a sharp whisper as they passed into a long vaulted passage which apparently led underground. "Be brave—for just a little longer."

She shook convulsively, but soon her steps grew steadier and he was able to spare a morsel of mental advice to his own raw nerves.

"Keep cool, you shivering snipe!" he said savagely

to himself, "and, when the time comes, act like a man."

Soft music sounded from below, and they went downwards into the earth. The steps they trod were damp and mildewed.

"A merry sort of marriage—in a catacomb!" O'Dare commented inwardly; "but all the more convenient for a funeral."

A double door in front moved noiselessly on its hinges. A blaze of light burst through. He passed across the threshold of a crowded church and stared about him in blind amazement.

What he saw was warrant for his surprise.

The heart of the height on which stood the *hacienda* was hollow. A spacious cavern had been converted, in the course of many lifetimes, into a small cathedral, perfect in every detail, from the most intricate carving of its massive onyx pillars to the groined arches of its lofty roof. The loving labor of spent centuries had gone to make the cave a casket worthy of its pious purpose. Its architects had stinted nothing. Bodies and brains they had expended of their best and lavishly. It was a masterpiece, a finished monument to the dead men its makers.

Clusters of candles overhead lit up a sea of faces whose eyes, focussed on the aisle, bespoke a fearful curiosity: dark faces these, half-Indian, half-Spanish, but wholly unintelligent. The men and women serfs who served the head of a half-civilized republic,

herders, tillers of the soil, and household servants, all had been gathered there to see the celebration of a ceremony which might well bring down on the sacred edifice a bolt from heaven.

Lining the aisle up which the wedding-party passed, and in two ranks across the transept, was a half-company of infantry led by a boy-lieutenant whose tight lips bespoke his sense of the responsibility resting upon him. The rank and file looked on with rolling eyeballs, bewildered by the novelty of their surroundings and the rôle assigned to them without rehearsal. Stupid enough at best, their wits were paralysed for the present.

The solemn notes of a great organ echoed in the vault above. A thin, metallic chant rose from the congregation. The music swelled and crashed in deafening cadence as Ybarra stopped before the altar with his cousin facing him.

The priest passed up the steps. Fifi would have gone forward, but the President held up a hand, and from among the men in uniform on either side six files stepped forward. Four laid hands on O'Dare, about to stoop, so suddenly and in such wise that he could not even struggle. The other two stood close to Fifi, holding her gently where she was.

The whole affair had been stage-managed to a nicety, and Beatriz Ybarra, looking about her in despair, saw all chance of reprieve or succour lost.

The singing ceased, and at that instant there came thrusting up the aisle don Quentin Sariol, heavily

cloaked, in boots and spurs, and breathless from his journey.

In his great haste he had not even doffed his hat, and, when he did so, it was too late to stay him in his purpose.

"Let no man move a finger or I fire!" he cried—and no man did move: for he had the prospective bridegroom by the throat, at arm's length from himself, with head bent back upon the altar. In his right hand he held a cocked revolver, its muzzle making a white mark on the prospective bridegroom's forehead.

For a tense moment this endured; and then Ybarra spoke.

"You're earlier than I expected, señor Corbyn," he said quietly. "I wish you wouldn't press so hard upon your pistol."

CHAPTER XI

DON QUENTIN SARIOL

IT had struck Quentin Sariol as highly humorous that his superior in the executive of San Benito should have assumed the task of bending Beatriz Ybarra's will to his.

"The wedding ceremony will be entertaining—to the spectators," the Vice-President told himself, and grinned across the table at his private secretary.

"Make me a cipher message to His Excellency," he commanded. "Say that affairs of state will take me to the Golden Horseshoe on the instant, and that I hope to arrive in time to attend his nuptials.

"Afterwards order horses, three relays."

"And any escort?" asked the man of letters.

"I'll take two orderlies. Von Rudolf and his men have doubtless left the road safe, and—I'm not afraid."

He left the room to change his clothes for the prospective journey, and his underling glanced after him through gold-rimmed glasses.

"You're a deep well, don Quentin," said that worthy to himself, "and if you meet a few Reds by the way it will not inconvenience you."

"I only wish I knew whether you or the Tiger will come out on top."

There was an answer to the message waiting when Sariol came in again. "At half past nine to-night," it said; and that was all.

"I'll start at once, and dine with them at eight. I'm curious as to the outcome of the evening. It will also be amusing to watch them together," he reflected mischievously, and so set forth.

He made good speed upon the journey, finding fresh horses ready for him at each stage, and early sunset saw him at the entrance of the gorge wherein the President had been attacked the day before.

"We'll wait on this side until dark comes down," he told his two protectors, and dismounted. "It will be safer then than in the half-light."

He threw his reins to one of them and sauntered onward, sucking at his cigar, to a low ridge between two clefts in the cliff-side guarded by battlements of boulders, at the back of which the highway dipped again into the heart of the ravine, where it became a narrow wheel-track cut in the concave cliffs. The troopers had ensconced themselves among the rocks below to escape unfriendly observation.

"A sweet spot for an ambush!" said don Quentin inwardly, and sat down on the summit to make mental notes for future reference. Then his attention became concentrated on a split tree-trunk facing him in front, not a stone's-throw from where he was sitting, and he saw clearly a brown rifle-barrel rest-

ing upon the fork, behind which two white eyeballs were fixed steadily on the top left-hand pocket of his waistcoat.

He did not stir, nor yet cry out. He had recalled to mind the fact that a warm wind was blowing from behind him; and that, therefore, his voice might not carry far in that direction. And, even as his secretary had supposed, he had small cause to fear the revolutionists.

He did not move when he heard stealthy footsteps on the splintered shale among the undergrowth above him, but when a sharp voice said "Hands up!" he held his hands up promptly.

Some one behind withdrew the pistol from its holster in his belt, and, having made sure he had no other arms concealed about him, said suavely, "Thank you. I think you may drop your hands now, if you wish. But don't make any noise, or I ——"

The speaker stepped in front of him, a slim youth in the uniform of San Benito, and Sariol looked nonplussed for the first time.

"What means this outrage, *señor teniente*?" he asked stiffly. "Is the Vice-President of San Benito to be treated thus by a commissioned officer of the Republic?"

"Call up your men, and order them to lay their arms down," ordered his captor, as if he had not heard, and Sariol, bewildered but obedient, did so.

The troopers tramped along on foot, leading the

horses, to where he sat. They handed their weapons over without protest at a word from him, and, having explained the purpose of their presence in his company, were bidden to get back to Alta Cruz at top speed and on foot. They did so without delay, asking no questions, evincing no undue surprise, only too thankful that their throats had not been cut.

Sariol, still smoking philosophically, was led uphill, through a steep crevice, into the presence of another stranger, who seemed pleased to see him.

"We met in Alta Cruz three years ago, don Quentin," said that individual in answer to his prisoner's puzzled inquiry, and the Vice-President looked very much relieved. He had begun to doubt that he had sprung a trap of the Tiger's setting, and that the Vice-Presidential seat would soon be vacant.

"My old friend don Felipe Corbyn!" he cried, cordially. "I am delighted! But—how came you here?"

"*Santissima Maria!* It was *you* then who rode through the capital with twenty devils like yourself! We thought the Reds were at our throats until the north gate told us that a troop of Karl von Rudolf's fire-eaters had broken in there. And then the southern sallyport sent word up that a cavalry patrol had passed out hotfoot for the Golden Horseshoe.

"So you have all your men in our new uniform! You're brave, my old friend, and, as they say, none but the brave deserve success."

"Ybarra's at the Golden Horseshoe?" Corbyn asked as they sat down together by a deadwood fire concealed within a hollow on the hill-side.

"He is. And it may interest you to know that he intends to wed the doña Beatriz to-night. The hour is set for half past nine, and I was on my way to ——"

He turned his head, to hide the malicious grin called forth by his listener's startled malediction.

"It's only half past seven now," he said tentatively and looking at his watch. "There is still time to reach the *hacienda* ere the ceremony starts, if you would care to witness it with me. Ybarra would be pleased, I'm sure, to see you at his wedding."

"Excuse me for five minutes," his host interrupted, and, calling Meggs across from an adjacent fire, held whispered conversation with him.

Don Quentin Sariol made no demur when he was presently required to exchange his clothes for a spare uniform. He yielded up his papers without protest, and supplied the countersign correctly as if he had been performing an agreeable duty. In part he was, since any misfortune which might overtake Ybarra would help his own succession, while, once the President had the mastery of his cousin's millions, he himself might look for a short shrift.

It therefore suited his own hand to help the American in the mean time, and, when that rash spirit rode forth on his risky errand, with but two men

for following, he knew all Quentin Sariol could tell him concerning current dispositions at the Golden Horseshoe. That did not amount to a great deal, since His Excellency had always been astute enough to guard the secrets of his final refuge very jealously, but Corbyn was thankful for every detail thus available.

The night passed quietly after he had gone, and don Quentin made himself quite at home with his remaining hosts. He was, at worst, a cheerful scoundrel, with few illusions as to honesty in walk or conduct.

He laughed amusedly when Meggs showed him his own signature on the commission he had received from Barr of Mobile.

"A forgery, without doubt," he remarked, lying needlessly, as a matter of habit. "But all the same, señor, it would oblige me if you would put that document in the fire."

Meggs did so, having no further use for it, and Sariol thanked him effusively. "And we need bear the good Barr no great grudge," he remarked contemplatively, watching it burn. "I should have been glad, of course, if I could have availed myself of your services, but, as things are, you have found the uniforms very useful. I shall be infinitely indebted to you if you will forget that the name he forged was mine.

"In San Benito we are not yet civilised," he said to Allardyce as they sat smoking side by side, "and

might is right. My friend Ybarra rules with a high hand, and he has Von Rudolf to help him, but—now that there is a woman in the case we may see changes. Lopez of Paraguay was still alive when I was born, and he had cause to curse the petticoats before he died. Ybarra also calls himself ‘the Tiger,’ but as for me I need no alias. When the time comes I shall be merely Sariol, the President, and at your service always.”

The bait was clumsy. Allardyce ignored it, and the other said no more on that subject.

Next day hung very heavily on the hands of those who were waiting there the news which did not come.

The orders left by Corbyn were that they should stand fast for twenty-four hours, after which, failing word from him, they were to act as should seem to themselves most fitting.

When dusk came down again, Meggs and Allardyce consulted long and anxiously. With them now lay responsibility for the next step, and twenty lives beside their own depended on their decision, wise or unwise.

“Let’s put it to the others first,” suggested Meggs after they had formed a plan, whose sheer foolhardiness had for its sole excuse the lack of anything more feasible, and his friend readily approved the proposition.

“You talk to ’em, old chap,” said Allardyce, “and I’ll look after the Vice-President.”

Meggs gave the call which served for "assembly" and, to the group which gathered round him while Allardyce relieved the guard, explained the matter thus:

"The game's against us, boys, at this stage, and we're going to chance a bluff. You know how weak our hand is, and I'll tell you honestly that it may cost us all our chips. If any of you feel like coming in, it's boot and saddle right away, but we'll think none worse of those that stand out."

He stooped and loosened his own horse's halter from the picket-line, led Allardyce's also to the spot where their accoutrements were stacked, and got both ready for the road. Some one had saddled Sariol's before he went back for it; there was much noiseless bustle in the neighbourhood. When he numbered off the ready rank in front of him, there were just twenty men who had made up their minds to go the limit.

"There's no four-flushers in this bunch," said a gruff voice reprovingly; and he laughed softly as he answered, "That's a sure thing, McGuire."

They led their mounts, all fresh and willing after the long rest, down to the roadside, where they were on the point of starting southwards, when from the direction of Alta Cruz there was audible the thud of many hoofs, the clank of metal, and the echo of an angry order.

Out of the shadows which lay thick in the ravine appeared two shaggy heads, garnished with wicked-

looking horns, and swaying to and fro on heaving shoulders. Their slaverling lips blew steamy breath almost in Meggs' face before he realised that they were nothing more nightmarish than a yoke of mountain-oxen. The span of twenty shuffled past, the rearmost yoke bent almost to the earth beneath the weight of a high two-wheeled cart.

The driver was on foot, wielding both whip and goad. Perched up above him on the vehicle there was a woman, quarrelsomely inclined, to judge by the way in which she presently began to rate him for their slow progress. Her harsh, complaining voice disturbed the echoes overhead. The man made no reply beyond redoubling his efforts to hasten the pace of his leisurely charges.

"Halt, there!" cried Meggs, and at the words dark figures darted out upon the driver, who obeyed with business-like celerity. The woman sat quite still, and did not even scream.

Allardyce ran up, and "Drop that gun!" he said to her in English; "I've got you covered. Climb down, quick!"

His tone was ominous, and she did as he ordered, descending from her perch with the agility of a young girl.

"Who—who are you?" she asked, her accents thin and shaky, peering intently at the uniforms about her. "Shut up, Gonzalez," snapped Allardyce, "and don't ask silly questions."

A hurried consultation resulted in the release of

the waggoner, who proved to be a stupid peasant, pressed into the present enterprise at pistol-point. He made off, rejoicing, after he had handed over all his passenger's property, consisting of a Mauser rifle, a rusty Colt, and a full suit of man's apparel.

As to Gonzalez they were in two minds till Sariol begged speech of Allardyce and thereby helped them to a prompt decision.

"Where are you taking me?" the spy asked fearfully of the two troopers who had bound his hands and were now thrusting him toward a point where the highway hung starkly over a deep cleft within whose unseen depths a mountain stream made mournful music. He tottered as he walked, his teeth were chattering, and great beads of perspiration bedewed his pallid face. In his ridiculous disguise he made a singularly unattractive picture, and they who had heard of the *Hilario* answered sternly, "To a safe place."

He gave vent to a very hollow groan, and would have fallen but for their support.

At the edge of the precipice they dropped him, a huddled heap, and drew back while a half circle of their fellows hemmed him in with rifles ready.

Allardyce had charge of the firing-party. "Get up, Gonzalez," he adjured the guilty wretch who was grovelling at their feet.

"Don't shoot! Don't shoot, señor!" that condemned coward screamed. "Show mercy for a moment. It's worth your while, I swear. Don't

shoot! I'll buy my life from you. I'll tell you everything. Don't shoot!"

"There's nothing you can tell us we don't know," said Allardyce. "For the last time stand up, or —"

"My God! but wait," implored the doomed man. "I'll tell you how to reach the señorita. I'll take you through into the Golden Horseshoe. I'll ——"

"If you *could* take us safely into the Golden Horseshoe we might spare you—for the present," Allardyce answered in a most disbelieving tone. "But since you can't ——"

"I can; I can," Gonzalez urged. "There is a way ——"

"Take him along with you," said the Englishman contemptuously, and at the words the whimpering poltroon was picked up and led away.

To the Vice-President, whom they had decided to liberate, they bade a brief farewell, and he expressed great pain at parting.

"Yes; I'll go straight back to Alta Cruz," he assured them. "I do not pine to interfere between you and the Tiger, although I should have liked to look on—from a safe distance—at your meeting.

"Some day I may be able to serve you, *caballeros*; and, until then, discretion, eh? That which has passed is safe between the three of us? Commend me to His Excellency for my closeness, and—good-bye."

He went his own way, chuckling contentedly, and they rode forward into the mountains, Gonzalez on a led horse safely guarded.

He soon proved himself useful, for, at two points further on, the road was picketed. He gave them timely warning of that fact and they were able to pass unmolested at the cost of a short detour to avoid each in turn.

"I don't think much of their ideas of strategy," Meggs told Allardyce contemptuously, as they regained the road after the last of these. "If they had picketed the gorge ——"

"They might have been trapped in it," that older soldier answered, "and they value their own lives too highly to take any such risk. We must be cautious also: so much depends upon our getting in with all our men."

Travelling thus, it was after midnight before Gonzalez advised them that they were within long range of the ridge enclosing the *hacienda*.

"There are two regiments encamped behind it," he told them in a terror-stricken whisper. "That foreign mercenary, young Von Rudolf is in command. We must bear west to where the stream comes forth, and then ——"

He hesitated. "What then?" demanded Meggs suspiciously.

"There is the tunnel it flows through."

"Which will be guarded!"

The traitor cogitated deeply ere he spoke again.

"There is no guard, señor. That is the secret with which I have bought my life from you. I trust it to your honour—you are both gentlemen, and—that was the bargain."

He looked up furtively, licking dry lips, well knowing that the secret might be worthless.

"Your life will be a short one unless we get safely through," Meggs answered grimly. "Lead the way to the tunnel-mouth."

Leaving the road, their route lay through the broken country at the base of that gigantic peak out of whose skirts the Golden Horseshoe had been scooped. Ere long they were forced to dismount and lead their horses, but in due course they reached the wooded valley through which had exit the brawling stream whose source was in the mountain-face beyond the ridge.

There was no great head of water running, and Gonzalez gasped relief. Had the great sluice at one end of the reservoir within the wall of rock above been wide, the tunnel would have been impassable, and there would have been scant hope for him.

"You'll have to leave your horses," he explained.

"Where?" asked Allardyce.

"There is an opening in the bank—see, there—with grass and water in abundance."

It was too late to balk at details. They had no option but to do as he directed.

A breathless scramble up the waterside took them to a low opening at the base of the ridge, which they entered blindly.

Gonzalez led the way, a stirrup-leather fast about his waist, and Allardyce had one hand clenched in that while in the other was a cocked revolver.

"Make no false steps," observed that anxious follower, "lest I should blow your brains out by mistake."

"Be very careful, señor," begged his guide uneasily. "I'll take you safely through, upon my honour. A short half-hour will see us on the other side."

Nor did he speak beside the mark, for, five and twenty minutes later—five and twenty years they seemed to the torn and bedraggled climbers—the solid gloom gave way to dim star-light and they emerged within a well-like opening over which waved tall ghost-like grass and rustling leaves.

Allardyce drew Gonzalez back.

"Why is this entrance left unguarded?" he inquired menacingly.

"It is His Excellency's private exit, known only to himself—and me," the spy replied. "By opening the water-gate above, it can be blocked."

"Why is the gate closed?"

"To fill the reservoir up for the garrison."

They waited there till word came up the line that the last man was within touch, and Meggs crept ahead to see whether their course was clear.

"There's no one within sight or hearing," said Gonzalez. "We're well within the ridge, and all the troops are kept close in quarters there lest they should spoil His Excellency's crops. There's señor Meggs signalling."

Up above, in the open air, no time was wasted.

Gonzalez pointed out the black bulk of the strange table-land on which Ybarra's refuge stood, and they held straight for it in single file behind him, their backs towards the twinkling points of fire which showed the strength of the two regiments set there to keep intruders out.

He did not lead them to the stair-foot, where there was also a fire burning and a sleepy sentry to discourage visitors, but, skirting the other side of the plateau, reached a long range of cattle-sheds and huts.

"Be very cautious," he requested breathlessly. "The peons' quarters lie about these buildings and there are many dogs."

Even as he spoke one growled suspiciously, a dozen others answered it.

"Run!" said Gonzalez, and they ran, in time and no more to escape the pack which came hotfoot upon their trail as they shut the door of the long stable they had entered.

They clambered to the loft above, and, through an ivy-covered trap-door there, into a crevice of the overhanging cliff.

At the far end there was a second scuttle of solid steel, for which Gonzalez had a key, and, once within it, he assured them that there would be no pursuit.

"Only His Excellency comes and goes by this and the water-gate," he said. "The stair on which we stand leads to his private chapel."

CHAPTER XII

DOM AGUSTÍN'S IDEA

"I WISH you wouldn't press so hard upon your pistol," said Ygnacio Ybarra. "It hurts my head."

"You'll have no head immediately," Corbyn retorted sternly, his trigger-finger trembling as he heard a rustle at his back.

"Unless," he added doubtfully, "you are prepared to carry out the orders I shall give you."

"Spare him—for my sake, Phil," a woman's voice cried, and Beatriz would have laid a hand on his arm but that he ordered her away. His chance of success hung on a thread too slender to take any further risk.

"Stand still!" he ordered, in Spanish, "or I fire."

"Let no one move," Ybarra echoed, "till I give the word."

Then their eyes met again, and he continued: "Tell me what you would have me do, and I—I'll do it."

Corbyn tried hard not to show his relief. He had not dared to hope that he could thus coerce his rival, who, among many evil qualities, had never been accounted a coward. Ybarra's reckless disregard of

death and his stubborn courage had helped him to the place he held and enabled him to sit secure where a more cautious man would most assuredly have come to grief.

His smooth assent to that which was required of him, without demur or counter-stipulation, made things much easier for the American.

"Order your men to ground their arms," that strategist requested, and the President complied. His words were audible throughout the edifice. The rank and file laid down their rifles, the staring subaltern in charge cast sword and pistol clattering on the tessellated pavement: he felt the degradation of this strange surrender keenly, but, for Ybarra's sake, he yielded. It would have done no good to shoot down the intruder and so cost the trapped President his life.

"I'll take a gun now, Corbyn," said O'Dare, released from durance, and joyfully assured that, however it might have happened, it was Philip Corbyn himself who stood there, master of the situation.

"Do, Denny," his friend answered. "Come up beside me."

"And I, Phil?" Beatriz asked humbly.

"Yes, both of you," he said, and they came forward, armed. Their reinforcement carried matters more swiftly forward, and, when Fifi also volunteered, the congregation was completely cowed by the three weapons levelled at them, while in the background lay His Excellency, helpless in

the hands of a mysterious stranger, his very life dependent on their prompt obedience.

"Have the church cleared," commanded Corbyn. "The women first and then the workmen; the troops will follow, with the lieutenant last. They are to leave the *hacienda* by the stairway. I have men posted there and any one who speaks ere he or she sets foot upon the road below will be blown into space without a moment's mercy."

An angry light shone in Ybarra's eyes as he confirmed this disposition. He could not possibly conceive by what means Corbyn had succeeded in obtaining entrance for the "men" of whom that anxious diplomat had spoken so assuredly. He did not know that there were only two, and in the uniform of his own army, who had replaced the topmost sentries by the expedient of a flask of potent spirit duly drugged. For the first time he began to doubt the durability of his luck. If his opponent held the stairway his own position would be doubly difficult.

There was no present help for it, however, and he heard his awestricken dependents shuffle away in silence, followed by the surrendered soldiery. They streamed up the long passage to its exit without a whisper, out into the darkness, and down the stair past the two troopers stationed at the top.

And when the keepers of the stair-foot would have questioned them the women broke and ran, with white lips, for the safe shelter of the huts behind

the stables. Their menfolk followed sheepishly, and, after them, the guard of honour came forth, unarmed, impotent. The last to reach ground-level was the boy-officer who had been chosen to command it. His black eyes were suffused with tears of shame, his empty fingers twitched convulsively, and his cheeks were chalk-like in their pallor.

He formed his men up, and marched off to camp, there to inform Von Rudolf of what had happened.

Ybarra was by this time bitterly repentant that he had not bidden the General himself attend the ceremony. He had been so secure in the inaccessibility of his natural stronghold that he had thought it more prudent to insure the safeguarding of the outer gate, and, furthermore, the said Von Rudolf had to perfection that most debonair and winning way with women which don Ygnacio was ever striving to attain but with equivocal success. It had not seemed advisable to His Excellency to challenge comparison with the young soldier in all the glory of full regimentals, and still less so to expose that young gallant to further contact with the doña Beatriz.

He was still cursing his precautions for the general good when Corbyn stepped back and bade him stand upright.

He did so, gladly, and the two rivals faced each other for the first time since they had dropped their masks. At one side stood the girl for whom they were staking everything. Fifi and O'Dare looked

on, the latter with his rifle ready for any eventuality.

"Denny," said Corbyn, "you know this place better than I. Will you find out if all's well above? The stair-head must be held at any cost, and, if there's any other entrance to the *hacienda*, it will be well to guard that also. It won't be long before we have Von Rudolf to reckon with. I'll send you word if you're needed here again." O'Dare went off to carry out the duty imposed on him, and, when he found that all the company he could count upon for the defense consisted of two devil-may-care cavalry troopers with a West Point vocabulary, barely escaped brain-fever. But he soon assimilated some of their ideas as to the wisdom of evading worry until that spectre should assume a tangible and concrete shape, and so sat down to help them hold the fort at the stair-head, since he knew of no other vulnerable point, while underneath them the dumfounded guardians of the stair-foot squatted over their fire and spoke in whispers of the inexplicable movements they had witnessed.

"You're foolish, señor Corbyn," said Ybarra, "to come here thus. You have me at a disadvantage for the moment, but—you scarcely hope to escape with your prize, I presume?"

"Can we not settle matters amicably? I—I am willing to make terms."

Beatriz was about to speak, but checked the impulse. Corbyn was looking fixedly at her half-cousin,

whose eyes fell before the American's straightforward glance.

"You take me for a fool, Ybarra," he answered presently, "and perhaps you're right. I'd rather be an honest fool than a clever rogue. But if you think I'm fool enough to take your word for anything you've overshot the mark. Pardon my speaking plainly, but—it will be best to understand each other.

"No terms that you could offer would tempt me to trust you. Your reputation is not that of a fool; and still less that of an honest man."

The President's pale face grew paler and his teeth clenched under the unvarnished rejection of his right to treat in honour with an enemy.

It was so long since any one had dared to twit him with his weakness that he had grown to think himself no worse in that respect than any of his neighbours. Upon his pedestal of autocracy he had been immune from criticism; its personal application stung him to the verge of violent outbreak.

But with an effort he controlled his feelings.

"You have me at a disadvantage," he repeated, "for the moment. What do you mean to do?"

"I have accomplished my immediate object," Corbyn responded, "which was to prevent your molesting the lady who will shortly be my wife. I don't know that I need discuss with you my further plans."

"It would perhaps be waste of time if they have

any reference to the doña Beatriz," Ybarra countered, and his cousin at length broke silence.

"Phil," she said in a tense whisper, and her lover held out his right hand to her. She moved towards him and he caught her in a close embrace which healed all the hurts between them. But all the time he kept his left arm free and both eyes fixed on His Excellency—who was inwardly cursing his astuteness.

"Phil," she said again, shyly, nestling against his shoulder, "there is a priest here. Why should not we ——"

"We will, sweetheart," he answered rapturously, "and right away. It was to that end that I ventured to detain his reverence.

"Come forward, holy father. There will be a wedding, after all."

Dom Agustín obeyed with terror-stricken readiness. Penned in beyond the altar, he had been prevented from escaping with his parishioners, and had waited dumbly while the two men talked.

"We'll need another witness," Corbyn observed to the now blushing Beatriz. "Fifi, could you find Denny for us?"

"I'd go myself, but it would not be wise to leave——"

"I'll go," said Fifi bravely, and, passing with swift footsteps, she disappeared in the dark passage leading to the upper air. The echo of her footsteps became fainter and then ceased.

Ybarra moved an inch or two to one side.

"Stand still," his adversary ordered, and the words clicked like the snapping of a steel trap. He stood still, since he could see the blue-nosed bullets in the revolver-barrel. His teeth showed bare behind the black moustache and his whole attitude was that of a beast about to spring. Corbyn held him at bay with unwinking watchfulness.

There was a sudden flash, and Beatriz uttered a single strangled cry as she saw her lover sink to the floor without a sound. So instantaneous had been the impact of the great golden candlestick the priest had used as missile that no shot was fired. The stricken man relaxed his trigger finger with the others and lay starkly still.

Ybarra sprang at her and held her lips, his chaplain helping him to silence her despite a desperate resistance. Voices resounded from the stairway. Fifi and O'Dare were coming down together. The two men lifted her into a yawning tomb behind the altar. The great stone slab which had moved at a touch to give them entrance swung into place again without a sound.

She was aware of an unpleasant, earthy odour and that they were descending. Almost immediately they stopped and set her on her feet. And one said, sneeringly, "Your pardon, cousin, if we have seemed rough or hasty. We had scarce time to stand on ceremony with you."

She did not answer, knowing that nothing she could say would help her plight.

The place in which they were standing was pitch dark, and she assumed that it must be a crypt connected with the chapel.

Ybarra spoke again, quite confidently, confirming her impression that it would serve no purpose to cry out for help.

"Dom Agustín will lead the way," he ordered. "Come, Beatriz. Tread carefully; the steps are slippery—in places."

He led her forward and she followed, dumbly helpless in his hands, down an interminable flight of steps in a Cimmerian darkness beyond words oppressive, the only sounds their dragging footsteps and Dom Agustín's laboured breathing. That good man seemed to be suffering grievous distress, both body and mind.

Their progress was slow, and twice Ybarra urged the priest ahead to greater speed. But as he was about to speak complainingly a third time there rose from underfoot in front a bitter and blood-curdling cry; a long-drawn wail that rose full-voiced without a moment's warning and thinned away and died out in illimitable distance like the last echo of a lost soul's farewell. Even Ybarra shivered.

The girl beside him stopped and thrust her fingers into her ears. Her knees were trembling under her. She would have fallen but that he upheld her and spoke soothingly.

"Be brave," he said. "*We* are quite safe."

"What—*what* was that?" she asked, a shrinking horror of him in her tone.

"It must have been—— It was—— But never mind," he answered reassuringly. "*We* are quite safe."

"It was the priest," she whispered brokenly; "and—and—you *knew* that he was going to his death, Ygnacio!"

"I thought he had the secret," said Ybarra sullenly. "There is some traitor in my household. I thought it must be he."

"I would have warned him, but—it was an oversight—an accident—I was not thinking. I am not to blame."

"We must—we must get on—away from here. Come. Close your eyes if you feel giddy. You need not fear while I am with you."

He struck a light and looked about him. His face was wet and ghastly.

A few steps further down there was a cresset in the tunnel wall and in a niche underneath a plentiful supply of pine-knots. He paused to kindle a handful of these in the iron basket, and the illumination they supplied lasted until he had led his unresisting companion across the chasm into which their ill-fated forerunner had fallen headlong.

It was a gaping fissure in the heart of the Titanic altar upon which the *hacienda* stood, a cleft which came together overhead and in an alcove on either side of the tunnel. Below it seemed to open out in

bottle-shape, and Beatriz, looking unblinkingly into its black, abysmal depths as don Ygnacio guided her to safety on the other side, saw for herself the secret he had spoken of.

The stairway led directly to its lips and an infernal ingenuity had fashioned the steps on either side in such wise that a stranger must most surely slip and so slide smoothly to a most dreadful death. For those who knew, there was a narrow gallery, a two-foot ledge cut for a man's height in the rock around the lip skirting one corner of the open mouth. No one who did not know the turning could escape.

Ybarra breathed more freely after they had set another hundred steps between them and the greedy oubliette.

"I hate this passage!" he said savagely. "I've always hated it. Thank God we're nearly through."

His spirits rose again, however, as soon as they had gotten through the egress in the ivy-covered cliff-face behind the stables at its foot.

Thence they emerged unseen, unheard, and, since His Excellency could not seek conveyance save at the risk of rousing inconvenient curiosity, they were compelled to make their way on foot towards Von Rudolf's camp.

Beatriz went with him, unresisting, since to resist would have been futile, but she refused his proffered arm and walked apart while he chatted volubly in the reaction which followed the strain he had endured.

"Dom Agustín is dead—and buried," he said, "more's the pity. But the old monks who made my private passage—the Golden Horseshoe was once a mission, Beatriz, but long ago when the Spaniards ruled here—must shoulder the responsibility.

"There is no other priest at hand—and I must wait a day or two, for appearance' sake, before I nominate a new chaplain. I can't conveniently account for his disappearance till then.

"He was a faithful fellow, Beatriz; and always wide awake. He caught my idea about the candlestick at once—a telepathic sympathy, no doubt. It will be difficult to find his equal. I'll soon find some one else to marry us, though."

She bore with him because she must, but speechlessly, and was unspeakably relieved when the sharp challenge of a sentry interrupted his reminiscences: for then he took upon himself again the dignity of his high office and his habitual reserve.

Von Rudolf galloped out to greet them when he heard of their miraculous appearance at the picket, and, having satisfied himself that it was really they, made hasty disposition for their housing in the camp, sending a man in on his own horse with all the orders necessary. He walked back at His Excellency's side, discussing Corbyn's most audacious move and planning prompt reprisals, but asked no needless questions.

They sauntered slowly through the lines that their men might reassure themselves as to the President's

capacity for further mischief—the story that the guard of honour had brought back had not improved his prestige—and see beside him doña Beatriz, the beautiful and wealthy; upon whose whim, it had been rumoured, depended all the back pay due them. And, by the time they reached the tents which had already been prepared for their reception, everything there was as comfortable as it could be made at such short notice.

Von Rudolf's field-pavilion had been swept and garnished for His Excellency's cousin. After Ybarra had inspected it she plead fatigue and passed within, leaving the others to their own devices. Once inside, secure from observation and intrusion, she threw herself despairingly on the thick rugs with which the floor was covered. Her head fell forward on her forearm; two tears of misery ran down her wrists; and then she slept, the deep and dreamless slumber of exhaustion, mental and physical.

When she awoke, refreshed and strengthened, it seemed strange to her that day had not yet broken. The inner chamber where she lay was dark, but in the anteroom beyond a shaded lamp was burning. And, seated in a rocking-chair, was Fifi Florian sewing busily.

She lay still for a moment, struggling to recollect, somewhat bewildered, and, between the curtains, saw Fifi rise as a step came softly towards the canvas porchway, also discreetly draped.

Some one tapped gently and a hand which held

a scrap of paper was thrust through. Fifi took that with downcast eyes, and, turning her back to the intruder, read the note, scribbled a hasty answer on the reverse side, and entrusted it to the five fingers visible behind the screen.

The hand was withdrawn, the sound of receding footsteps died away, and the occupant of the rocking-chair faced about with guilty haste, laying finger on lips imploringly, as Beatriz came through to confront the traitress who was on terms so confidential with her worst enemies.

"Fifi!" she said in a heart-broken whisper, her whole soul in revolt against the thought that her only woman friend could display such calculating treachery.

Fifi held up a hand in protest, and answered swiftly: "Be very cautious in case we're overheard.

"I'm Jerry Meggs."

CHAPTER XIII

A LOSING HAZARD

BEATRIZ drew back, regarding him with a blind bewilderment. He would have paid in his heart's blood for the right to take her into his own arms, and hold her safe there from her enemies and his. But that might not be.

"I don't—I can't—*who* are you?" she asked dully. "Where have you come from? How long have I been here?"

He had seen that in her heavy eyes which helped him to understand.

"I'm Jerry Meggs," he repeated distinctly, setting all his dead dreams behind him for her sake. "I've come from Phil Corbyn, to take you back to him. He's at the *hacienda*, and none the worse of the blow the priest dealt him. You've been here for close on twenty-four hours, and much has happened in that time. I think you must have had some opiate to make you sleep so long."

The cloud lifted from her mind while he spoke. She had swiftly recalled the past, recollected how little cause he had to run any such deadly risk for her sake. She could see from his face that his

feelings towards her had undergone no change since that day on which he had told her in London that he was hers to dispose of, body and soul. The simplicity of his self-sacrifice touched a responsive chord in her heart. His life was hers, without need of words, though she had naught to give in exchange. She held out both her hands to him with an impulsive gesture of gratitude.

"Jerry," she said, very softly, "you're more than generous."

She could make him no better return, and even that he would have disclaimed.

"Hush, hush," he answered. "I only seek to see you happy. There's nothing out of the way in that. Say no more now. We're not alone."

She glanced about her, but there was no one else visible within the canvas walls.

"Tell me," she begged in a low voice, "how you come to be with Phil. What has happened?"

"I must be very brief," he responded. "I reached his side a couple of hours ago with the rest of the force he has got together to rescue you. Dennis O'Dare fixed me up to play Fifi, and I came tripping across with a line from Corbyn to say that you would be sure to require your maid. The pickets passed me quite readily, and Von Rudolf sent me in here at once. He's just been at the door begging a few words with me. I answered that I would see him in twenty minutes or so, and that he must be careful not to disturb you. Something is

going to happen then, and I'll trust you not to make a single sound, whatever you see or hear.

"Ybarra's on his way back here from Alta Cruz, where he went yesterday to talk to Quentin Sariol, who has been plotting against him. He's bringing a priest with him, too. The one who came with you has disappeared.

"Now's our time, therefore. The coast is as clear as it ever will be, and, if you feel all right again, we'd better——"

"Yes, I'm quite wide awake now," she assured him. "They must have drugged my drinking-water, I think. I drank some just before daylight. It seems so short a time since I saw dawn across the threshold. But how—what chance is there of our escaping?"

"Where's the glass you drank from?" he asked eagerly in reply. She brought out from the inner room a cut glass caraffe still half full, and an empty tumbler.

Meggs held the former up to the light, and then shook it. Its contents clouded over.

"They're third-class criminals, and clumsy ones at that," he commented more cheerfully than he had heretofore spoken. "Do you know Mr. Chalon?"

She shook her head, in surprise.

"You will some day," said he. "He's a good friend of ours. He and I have fixed up a plan to get you away. And now, if you will—if you will

change your costume for that which I have brought you in this suit-case, I'll have you safely back at the *hacienda* with the real Fifi for company by the time His Excellency comes to pay his morning call here. But you must not put off a moment in the process, please. If he should catch us by the way it would be worse than ever for us all. And don't take any notice of what happens here."

She caught the case up and disappeared with a nod of assurance ere he could finish.

He turned aside and lifted a corner of the great tiger-skin which covered a dim corner of the ante-room, behind the chair in which he had been sitting.

"The game's afoot, old chap," he whispered hurriedly. "If any trouble comes to you through your connection with it, send up the signal and I'll do my best to bring you assistance. We owe you more than we can pay already, and——"

Challoner scowled denial. "Oh, fiddlesticks!" said he. "I'm only amusing myself in my spare moments. I've nothing else to do till the Tiger returns."

Meggs dropped the rug over him, again, turned the lamp lower, and crossed swiftly to the porch. Some one without was coming quietly towards the pavilion. He thrust a hand out through the curtains, and waved it in a manner which he hoped might be set down as ladylike. Soft footsteps once more sounded on the sun-baked soil, and some one, stooping, kissed his fingers.

He grinned in a most unladylike manner, but composed his features ere he pulled the screen slightly apart and Karl Von Rudolf entered with a low reverence.

The latter was in undress uniform, a straight and slender figure with a boy's face, but sadly lined and seamed by the experiences which had made a man of him before his time, and wistful blue-grey eyes which betrayed disappointment as he peered in the semi-darkness at the shy girl before him.

"Your pardon for disturbing you, ma'm'selle," he said in French, "but you resemble so very closely a lady——"

Meggs simulated an eager interest, and nodded. He signed to the soldier that he should seat himself, and made pretense of listening intently for any sound from the inner apartment. He was really stifling his scruples concerning the part he must play.

Von Rudolf, somewhat mystified, obeyed him, and lay wearily back in the rocking-chair. His legs shot out in front of him, the chair tipped upwards, and a cord across his throat cut short the cry of anger and astonishment to which he would have given utterance.

Meggs passed hastily behind him, and, with a scarf, blinded him most effectually; secured his wrists and ankles to the arms and legs of the chair, and poured the contents of the caraffe into his open mouth. To gag him efficaciously was easy, and after that he was quite powerless. Sight, speech,

and hearing were shut off. The languor of drugged impotence was already loosening his straining limbs.

Meggs had executed these manœuvres at top speed, and he next turned his attention to providing the invaluable Challoner with an alibi which should be unimpeachable when he should be discovered there, as must inevitably happen, since his professional duties forbade his joining the rescue-party. That gentleman was still on his knees behind the rocking-chair, shaking with soundless laughter.

"By the holy poker!" said he, "but that was a tricky turn, Jerry. It almost made me explode to see you mincing about like a hen on hot bricks, with a love-lock over one eye.

"I'm only sorry," he went on more gravely, "that it's Von Rudolf and not Ybarra we've had to put out of action. But needs must when the devil drives, and it was the only way.

"Now get busy, and don't forget to handle me this side up with care."

Meggs tied him also hand and foot, tucked him tenderly under the rug again, patted his curly head approvingly and held up a handkerchief.

"Ready?" he asked.

The correspondent nodded. "That was a tricky turn!" he repeated. "I'm a gold medallist gar-roter. Give Corbyn and Allardyce my love, and don't forget to tell them both that I'm still on the staff of the *Wireless*. I don't mind lending a help-

ing hand at an odd moment now and then, but it's only by way of relaxation."

"I'll tell him you're the ace of trumps," Meggs responded in a gruff voice. "What hope would I have had of doing any good here if you hadn't——"

"'Nuff said," snapped Challoner. "Get busy, or I'll bite you."

He signified, as soon as he in turn was gagged and blinded, that he could live quite comfortably till relief came. Meggs gave him a very gentle farewell pat, and pulled the rug up carefully.

There was another young man waiting when he had finished all his preparations for flight; a shapely youth in motor garb and goggles, short coat and cap and puttees all complete; who was blushing vividly.

She had started at sight of Von Rudolf's figure covered with a tablecloth, and stood aghast when Meggs faced her in the General's field uniform.

"It's I all right," he said to reassure her. "Do I look like him?"

"I thought it was he—and that you," she answered, staring at the outline in the chair.

"You're Challoner, a correspondent of the *Wireless*, come through Alta Cruz from the coast in search of news," Meggs explained rapidly. "Your motor bicycle is behind Von Rudolf's tent."

"Von Rudolf's going round the pickets now, and you'll go with him. When we get to the outermost we may have to make a break for the stairfoot which

is held by Corbyn's men. If anything goes wrong you must run for it, while I keep any friends that follow in check. Whatever happens you must make for the *hacienda*. Ready?"

"Quite ready."

"Off we go then, and—good luck to us."

He turned the lamp out, and they started on their perilous enterprise. Their way led through the officers' lines, and from the bell-tents there the sound of snoring smote upon the small hours. Beyond were the servants' bivouacks, rude shelters, screens of plaited grass. And then the kitchens, where a night cook, brewing coffee for the duty-detail, sprang to attention as they passed and startled Beatriz so that she all but screamed. Von Rudolf had apparently succeeded in imbuing his subordinates with a profound respect for military etiquette.

Meggs lifted a forefinger in perfunctory response, and, looking back from a safe distance, saw that the man had squatted down beside his fire again.

"I think that we'll pass current," he encouraged her.

They followed the made road which ran straight from the ridge to the stairfoot, and twice met orderlies bringing reports in from the pickets. Meggs opened these and read them nonchalantly, striking matches for light to do so in the shadow of his great coat, keeping his chin well down within the collar.

The first of them he sent on into camp, the sec-

ond was instructed to return whence he had come and bid the non-commissioned officer in charge await the General's arrival.

He lit a cigarette, and, taking his companion by the arm to steady her, strode forward, chatting cheerfully in French of the most nondescript. As they approached the outpost set halfway between the *hacienda* and the ridge, he stopped as if to illustrate a point, puffing smoke the while. They turned the guard out in his honour and despite his indifferent protest; he looked it over quickly, and passed on. Only a last outlying picket lay between safety and disaster. He had played his part admirably.

They had all but won through when from the camp resounded the call to arms. A single rocket soared up and dropped two blue stars. They heard the sound of hurrying feet behind, and in front had to face seven rifles waiting the word to fire.

Meggs swore vociferously at the picket's corporal who presently came forward and was most apologetic when he saw the General; but would by no means part with him.

"It is by your own order, General," he said appealingly, "and you will doubtless have me shot, like those poor fellows who let señor Sariol pass through, if I do not obey the very letter of it. There were two stars and that means 'hold all comers whatsoever.' It is by your own order, General. For God's sake don't push past me, or I'll fire!"

"Now run," cried Meggs in such a tone that his companion did not dare to disobey. And at that instant his left hand shot forth, the corporal fell over backward with a choked grunt, while the mere rank and file, too much astonished by such a strange display on the part of their redoubtable chief to offer further resistance, were glad to see him disappear into the darkness ahead. As soon as he was out of sight they judged it well to open an aimless fire upon the surrounding scenery.

Two or three bullets whistled past the fugitives, but they paid no attention to any such trifles. What frightened Meggs far more was the faint thud of hoofs behind his back, that did not die down but gained in volume until he knew that the pursuers must be dangerously near.

"Keep straight on," he told Beatriz abruptly, and stopped short himself.

She knew that it would only hamper him if she should lag, and went on most unwillingly, but with fresh energy, for, if she were out of the way, there would be hope for him. She heard the crack of his revolver and loud cries.

A moment later she fell headlong into the arms of a grey shadow travelling outward at a great pace and with others following behind.

"Who's this?" it asked most anxiously, and she replied, "Phil! He's back there. Oh! quick—or you will be too late."

Neither had any thought of self while the man to

whom both owed so much was still in danger. But Corbyn was too late, and that although he lost no single instant. And there was a fierce skirmish in the dark between his handful and the hurried reinforcements which had made the pickets' post impregnable against him. But for the darkness he had even been cut off from his own base, and, as it was, he had to fight hard to regain the stairfoot. There he found safety in the end, but, as he carried up the steep stone steps the slim boy whose recovery had cost them such a comrade, his grey eyes were bedimmed; and he held Beatriz very closely to him, for she was doubly dear now.

Fifi was waiting at the top. She took the inanimate figure from his arms and carried it away. Allardyce and O'Dare spent the remainder of the night in proving to each other and to Corbyn that when fate steps in human effort is of no avail.

"It's just the narrowness that pinches," Corbyn concluded sorrowfully, as day broke. "Less than a hundred yards we lost him by, I reckon. I wish that he had let me go instead of him."

A clear, cold dawn showed that the plain beneath was empty save for the customary outposts. The scant light strengthened, and the sun changed their grey prison walls to gold. Spirals of smoke rose slowly from the ridge, and the world woke about them without discord.

It seemed that they were not to be molested yet a while, and, since the hour for a daylight attack

was safely past, they tried to snatch some sleep. But none came to their aching eyes.

When Beatriz came forth, in her own guise again, she found the three seated together in the garden, staring across at the far camp. They rose at the sound of her approaching footsteps, and a faint flush suffused her sweet face; she nestled close to Corbyn, as he came forward, took her hand, and put an arm protectingly about her.

It was no time for tender speeches, but he said "Sweetheart," very softly—"sweetheart, forgive me."

"It has all been my fault, Phil," she answered, her tone tremulous as she looked up into his bronzed, haggard face. He stood there for a moment, gazing into her true eyes, the recollection of his old doubt and distrust a shame within him. And Allardyce, he who had been disposed to pity Meggs for his infatuation, fell a slave at that instant to the spell of her compelling loveliness, as had O'Dare in the beginning.

Corbyn beckoned him forwards and held out her right hand to him. Allardyce took it reverently, and, stooping, raised it to his lips. No words could have expressed more fully his pledge of faithful service. Beatriz blushed again, and Corbyn smiled at the impassive Englishman's courtly behaviour.

Then O'Dare stepped up and shook hands with her.

"You're safe at last," said he, his voice full of grave pleasure. "Fifi and I have been heart-broken for you."

Corbyn took her across to the stairhead, where the men had their quarters, and at sight of her they raised a cheer which rang back from the distant rock-face. Her beauty was a revelation to them, and they found it cause far more than sufficient for Corbyn's expedition. None among them but felt thankful then that they had followed him so far, no man but was confirmed in his purpose by the thought of her helplessness.

And the thought of all that they had already braved to help her, of their uncomplaining devotion to their brave leader, her gallant lover, thrilled her unspeakably. She thanked them for their warm welcome in broken words, and then Corbyn led her back to the garden-paths, to straighten out the tangle which had brought her and himself to such strange pass.

"I thought you had forgotten me when no word came from you after I landed in New York, Phil," she said, glancing up with eyes that told their own tale.

"I was at Stephan Florian's funeral that day," he answered gravely. "I wrote and called repeatedly thereafter."

"Poor Fifi!" Beatriz whispered wistfully. "What a sad life hers has been since that dreadful duel!"

"I was to blame, of course," Corbyn continued

presently, "for believing that you thought my poverty a sufficient reason for closing the door against me."

"Phil!" she cried in a grieved voice. "You thought that of me! Oh! how could you?"

He pressed the hand he was holding, tenderly, and had no excuse to make for himself. But she returned the pressure.

"It has all been my fault," she asserted again. "I should have known that you would not slight me as—as I supposed you were doing. It was my own pride that kept me from sending for you till it was too late—till I got the note Joaquin Gonzalez had fabricated to say that you were lying dangerously hurt in that place where he made me prisoner. I have been sorely punished for that, Phil. I thought I had lost you altogether until you came thrusting into the chapel here."

"I, too, have suffered much because of my unworthy suspicions, and I was to blame, Beatriz, not you. Had I been less ungenerous, Gonzalez would not have found it so easy as he did to carry out his infernal plot. How he must have congratulated himself on my simplicity! All he had to do was to get your woman to intercept my letters, and tell the hotel people that I was to be turned away if I called. And I believed blindly that it was all due to my poverty!"

She said no more for a moment. It hurt her to hear his honest confession, till in her own generous

heart she found cure for that hurt. He had done what he could, while she had done nothing—until too late.

“Why did you quarrel with your father, Phil?” she asked presently. “I didn’t even know that you were on such terms with him, till Fifi told me.”

“He quarrelled with me, not I with him,” replied Corbyn very regretfully. “He—he had chosen a wife for me, sweetheart, and wanted me to join him in his business. I couldn’t see things his way in either direction, and—and he lost his temper.”

“That’s my fault, too, then,” said Beatriz, her eyes suffused. She had brought this bold lover of hers naught but trouble.

He stopped in the shadow of the waterless fountain which had once formed the green heart of the gardens, and with the hand he had slipped round her shoulders lifted her chin so that he could look squarely down into the troubled depths under her long lashes.

“Say that again,” he dared her, “and see what will happen to you.”

She smiled mistily up at him and opened her lips in defiance, but ere she could repeat her self-condemnation he had found means to close them most effectually. And in that brief, blissful moment they buried all that was past. She flushed rose-red, and her eyes were as twin stars then. She lifted two white hands to his broad shoulders, and

there was no more debt between them when Fifi came to call them in to breakfast.

The men-folk fumed and fretted all forenoon in forced inaction. It would have been sheer madness to attempt a sortie, and yet each man among them itched to propose that, to take part therein. But common sense prevailed, and no one annoyed his neighbour by suggesting an impossibility.

Their business was to get the women safely to the coast, and at all costs they must attend to that.

A sudden idea struck O'Dare and he communicated it to Corbyn, who jumped at it with concentrated eagerness.

"Where did you say they signalled from?" the latter asked. "The south side? Come along. We'll find the tackle if it's anywhere about the *hacienda*."

They had not far to look, for under a loose plank in the piazza there, they discovered all the heliograph equipment used for communicating with Alta Cruz when His Excellency happened to be at the *hacienda*.

Corbyn carried the tripod out and O'Dare the leather case containing the two mirrors. They set the apparatus up, sighted it on the main-guard at the ridge, and Corbyn, to whom such matters were as an open book since he had qualified in army signalling, sent an insistent call across to the enemy. Within ten minutes there came back an answering

flash, and he was soon holding conversation with Don Ygnacio.

His first inquiry was as to Meggs. Meggs was still alive. He asked if don Ygnacio would exchange him honourably for Gonzalez, but was informed that he might hang the latter out of hand himself, and so save don Ygnacio the trouble. It seemed that don Ygnacio was not pleased with his ex-spy. ““And—as to—the—señor—Meggs,”” Corbyn read off mechanically, turning the text of the flickering message into English for the benefit of his listening men, ““he will be shot—at—dawn—to-morrow. The rest—of—you—will be treated—likewise—when—the time—comes!””

“We need waste no more words on him,” said Corbyn curtly. “I’ll see whether I can’t call up Alta Cruz. Sariol might do something for us.”

Before he could achieve his purpose it had been forestalled, a message from the ridge forbidding the city to answer any signals but those preceded by the president’s cipher; all he could do was to read off the news that came thence to the camp, and, since the bulk of that was also coded, he learned little.

Allardyce and O’Dare in turn took their commander to one side in order to propound to him a private plan whereby each might take Meggs’ place, or, failing that, lead a forlorn hope to his rescue. It was, of course, impossible for Corbyn to countenance such a suggestion, or he would have gone forth himself.

Fortune had called a forfeit, fixing on Gerald Meggs to pay it. That he would do so with a good grace no one doubted, and the irrevocable could not be gainsaid, no matter what it might cost them to look on inactively.

Notwithstanding all the platitudes with which he met their plans, he himself went out again that night with a handful of volunteers, and fought for a full hour the force which had been set about his stronghold after dusk for the precise purpose of preventing such an outbreak.

When a new morning approached, there were three wounded men for the besieged to tend and that was all the reward they had won. These were bestowed in a hastily improvised hospital underground, and then their comrades gathered at the cliff-edge, waiting there helpless while the few minutes that held back dawn ticked swiftly away.

The circle on the plain below was drawing out of range, and from the ridge there came a regiment to reinforce it.

The doomed man's friends saw clearly through their glasses all that passed. There was a band, which played a dismal parody of the Dead March, and, close behind it, a rough coffin on a cart. After the cart there walked a woman, closely guarded.

Corbyn groaned aloud. "Poor chap, poor chap!" he said. "They might have given him a suit of clothes. What an inhuman brute Ybarra is!"

The sad procession halted midway between the

opposing camps, and waited there until the troops visible had massed upon it. They formed a hollow square, and at its open side a dozen sappers had soon dug a shallow grave. The woman stepped toward it without hesitation, and stood facing the firing party in the half-light, while an officer acting as provost-marshal declaimed in a loud voice her crime and its sentence. Faint echoes of his speech reached on the rare atmosphere to the *hacienda*. And while the men there were straining their ears in the effort to catch a chance word, they heard a cheery voice behind them, "Gad! but I'm glad to see you all again!"

It was Meggs himself who shook their hands after they had got over their first fright.

"What's doing down there?" he asked wonderingly, and, even as he spoke, a thin, white, straggling vapour wreathed the rifles of the firing party. The woman in front of them fell forward on her face and lay there, very still. A sudden, discordant crackle sounded jarringly on the silence. And at that moment Beatriz stepped out upon the piazza beyond the untidy flower beds, ignorant of the tragedy which had been played out below.

"Have you seen Fifi?" she called in her sweet, clear voice. "I can't find her anywhere."

But no one answered. All the others were eyeing Meggs, who was looking blankly down at where a dozen sappers were shovelling industriously.

CHAPTER XIV

VON RUDOLF'S PROMISE

THE Tiger of San Benito was at his wits' end. He did not know where to turn.

Only an hour ago he had escaped by the skin of his teeth from his own impregnable stronghold, which was now held against him, and with a sufficient garrison, by the man he hated worst in all the world. He knew that it would be impossible to regain possession of the great natural fortress by force of arms. While as for strategy Corbyn had outshone him at all points save one. He rubbed his hands, gloating over that, as he looked across the camp-fire at the white pavilion wherein Beatriz lay weeping. There was the prize for which the American and he were striving. His one point was worth more than all the others put together—if he could carry it through. But there was the trouble.

The death of dom Agustín had deprived him of an ally indispensable. Until he could replace the priest no binding ceremony could be celebrated, and he knew better than to leave his cousin any loophole of escape. Where there was property concerned, and that in the United States, one could

not be too careful that the due legal forms were all complied with.

He planned and plotted, gnawing at his fingernails, with ever and anon a calculating glance at his companion. He was lying in his chair, feet stretched towards the fire, for all the world as if he had been President of San Benito, Ygnacio Ybarra, the impecunious cavalier of fortune.

Since Von Rudolf was his right-hand man in matters military, he must still overlook the Austrian's insouciance. For matters military were in bad shape at that moment. The treasury was empty, the troops dissatisfied. He must have money, and that without a moment's loss of time. He had pledged his word to the people that he would bring a wealthy bride back from the Golden Horseshoe. The marriage must take place without delay.

He rose, his mind made up.

"I wish you'd find me a reliable escort, Karl," he said. "I'm going to ride in to Alta Cruz and see what Sariol's about. He's such an untrustworthy scoundrel—between ourselves. I'll bring a priest back with me, and—I must leave my cousin in your care. It would be too unsafe to take her with me to the capital."

Whereat the soldier scowled. He did not care to stay in camp while there was any chance of active movement. He cared still less to act as gaoler to a pretty girl, and said so to Ybarra bluntly.

"She will not worry you in any way," His Excellency promised. "I shall be back before she speaks to any one. I—I have taken precautions to keep her quiet."

Von Rudolf's scowl became a sneer, but he went out without more words to pick men for the President's safe-guarding; and, later, watched the life-guards ride away, without him for the first time since he had enlisted them.

All next day he went to and fro in evil temper, finding fault with everything. When night fell again, he sat down alone to smoke until "Lights out" should sound.

Challoner, hot and dusty, came in from La Boca on his motor bicycle before them. He knew Von Rudolf, as he knew most of the men worth knowing in those parts, and they sat down together to discuss events. Had the correspondent known that the chief executive was in Alta Cruz he would not have come so far in search of him. As it was, he learned what he could from his companion, and much of that surprised him.

The two of them were chatting amicably when an escort brought in a woman, come from the *hacienda* to their outpost and asking for His Excellency. In her Von Rudolf recognised Beatriz Ybarra's bashful companion, while Challoner, his face expressionless, but inwardly perturbed, arrived at an altogether different conclusion as to her identity.

She seemed to be too shy to speak, and stood before them with downcast eyes, her face close hooded, contenting herself with the delivery of an unsealed note from Corbyn to the effect that doña Beatriz would be the better of her companion's company.

Von Rudolf read it, and directed her to the pavilion. He was well pleased to be relieved of a responsibility, for Beatriz had been invisible all day and no one had intruded on her privacy. His eyes followed the cloaked figure as it disappeared within the porch.

"D'you know Vienna?" he asked Challoner inconsequently, and the correspondent nodded.

"I used to know a girl like that there," said the General, and sighed. It was so bitter to recall the past, which could not be undone.

They separated shortly afterwards, and Challoner, undressing in the tent assigned him, whistled shrilly what he fondly thought was "The Last Rose of Summer," till an adjacent sentry threatened to shoot him if he didn't stop.

He stopped, and from the white pavilion came a faint echo of the tune, which the sentry did not overhear.

The correspondent chuckled gleefully. "Right again," he said to himself. "I thought I couldn't have been mistaken. But he's a bold young scoundrel to thrust himself into the Tiger's claws like this. I'll have to see whether I can't lend him a hand before he finds himself ripped into shreds, as

he will be whenever Ybarra appears. I wonder whether he twigged me while he was standing there looking down his nose like a school-girl; but he acted his part pretty well, all the same. If I hadn't caught sight of his feet I'd have had no suspicions."

He blew out the light, having made such dispositions as he considered necessary, and, after peering out, crept forth from under the skirt of the tent at the back. The sentry was walking his beat, well removed from all chance of eavesdropping on the occupants of the pavilion. Challoner waited till his back was turned and then crawled serpent-like across the intervening space, bringing up in the lee of the larger shelter. Under its soft white wall he thrust a hand whose fingers held a calling card. That was snatched from between them, and, pulling a loose peg or two out of the ground, he slipped through under the canvas, coming up on his knees inside to discover Meggs, in his disguise, regarding him with a genial grin.

They exchanged a hearty hand-clasp before Challoner let loose on that reckless youth the vials of his righteous wrath, which did not, however, seem to disconcert his friend.

"Somebody had to do something, you see," said Meggs blandly in self-defence, "and this seemed the easiest way to get here."

"But how about getting back?" objected the other.

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it,"

Meggs replied. "What's the news outside? How do things stand now?"

Challoner told him all that he knew, and they had their plan half formed before Von Rudolf's coming forced him to take cover under the tiger-skin rug on the floor at the back of the rocking-chair, and made that plan so much more simple.

The General had grown restless, his brain was busy with a train of thoughts which hurt, and he had at last resolved to seek speech with the girl who was so like one he had used to know in Vienna. He could not believe that it was she, and yet the resemblance had struck him repeatedly since he had seen Fifi first at La Boca. He would ask her outright, and so salve his unrest.

He was told to return, and did so, only to fall unsuspectingly into the trap the two men had laid for him in the interval. And all would have gone well with their scheme but for Ybarra's over-early arrival from Alta Cruz.

His Excellency had enjoyed a very stormy interview with the Vice-President, and was all eagerness to share the city news with the young soldier. And he had brought a priest with him, what he had heard having proven the urgent need of haste in matters both matrimonial and financial.

Terrible, therefore, was his wrath when he discovered that which had befallen. He raved and raged, gnashing his teeth with that insane abandon which had won for him the soubriquet he was so

proud of. If there had been the slightest chance of finding an efficient substitute for Karl Von Rudolf, he would have had that innocent wrong-doer shot instanter. And as for Challoner, very wide awake behind his heavy eyelids and with a story of violent outrage on his liberty to tell, there were no threats severe enough. Him they unbound and banished back to Alta Cruz on his bicycle, without a moment's grace. Then Meggs was brought in captive, and placed in close confinement until the Austrian should have recovered from the influence of the opiate.

When Karl Von Rudolf came to himself, he dared who would to twit him with the mischance he had suffered. That he was bitterly ashamed of it went without saying, but even Ybarra thought it better to postpone the reprimand he merited until he should have achieved a more meek and chastened mood. Meantime a hasty field-court was convened and a mock trial took place. Von Rudolf bore no personal ill-will towards the prisoner for the audacious part he had played, but confirmed with a feeling of relief the finding which sentenced him to be shot next morning. It would be just as convenient to have him out of the way for the future. Dead men tell no ridiculous tales.

His Excellency countersigned the death-warrant without a word, and then turned his back on the General. They two were on the worst of terms for the time being. And while Ybarra was holding

communication with Corbyn by heliograph, Von Rudolf sought his tent, and stayed there waiting for the wind to change.

The day passed drearily enough for him, and he was not in any pleasant temper when, soon after nightfall, he saw a guard once more bringing towards his tent the cause of all his tribulation.

He sprang to his feet in anger and flushed up furiously, believing it to be some ingenious device of Ybarra's to put him to further shame.

But as the prisoner came to a halt before him, and stood there trembling, unable to articulate, a sudden flash of recollection flitted across his mind, stemming the outflow of the hot rage in his heart. For this was still more like the girl he had known. It was the girl herself.

He set a seat for her. She took it thankfully, and, after he had dismissed her escort with orders that they and their comrades on outpost should keep the strictest silence as to her entry, stepped aside so that the light from the fire without should fall on her face.

Then he shut his eyes to hide the hurt they showed at sight of her. Long years had passed since he had looked his last on the Hofburg, and she had changed, as a maid will, since they had paced its corridors together, but he knew now. And she had known since the day on which he had ushered her through the palace at Alta Cruz.

He set his heels together with a click of spurs and

squared his shoulders: as he had been wont to do in that past which was weighing so heavily on them both. A very handsome fellow he was as he stood there in uniform, the firelight flickering on steel and gold.

"In what can a Von Rudolf serve mademoiselle?" he asked with careful courtesy, in formal French.

"I—I had hoped to find a friend here, Karl," she said, her tone so wistful that he winced; and all his stiffness vanished.

"Fifi," he whispered pleadingly, on an overwhelming impulse, "will you believe me if I tell you that the fight was fair? God knows I did not mean to kill Gustav—— What hope would there have been of winning you across your brother's grave?—but he pressed hard upon my point and his foot slipped so that it pierced him to the heart.

"I would it had been I who——"

She held a hand up and so silenced him. "Gustav will share the blame when he and you cast count together, Karl," she promised for the dead man. "I know the fight was fair—since it fell between you and him. But oh! the pity of it." A sudden sobbing shook her, and he turned away his head, not knowing how he, her brother's murderer, might comfort her. Life had gone very hard with both of them since that dark day when Gustav Florian had died at his hands beside the Danube.

"Is Stephan with you?" he asked, as she dried her eyes, and fresh tears gathered while she an-

swered, "Stephan died in New York not many days ago. My poor Stephan! We suffered much together, he and I. He broke his heart in exile, and—and now I am the only Florian left.

"What of yourself, Karl?"

He shook his head, and sighed. "I'm finished," he said simply, "and with me the Von Rudolf line. It is best so.

"Forget me, Fifi, and—forgive me, if you can. My life is one long punishment.

"Now you must go. I'll see you through the lines somehow, and—don't come back. Even with me you are in gravest danger. I can't imagine how you got here safely—or why you came."

"I had no difficulty," she said simply. "The American sentries at the stair had no authority to stop me, and I came by the roadway to where your men were stationed. I know no Spanish, but when I spoke your name they seemed to understand. They were most courteous. You have much power among these people, Karl."

"I am commander-in-chief of the forces of San Benito," he answered gravely.

"I came to ask a favour of you," she continued, and for a moment he looked happier. Then his brows bent again, as he remembered that a man must die at dawn, and for the cause which claimed her also.

"Fate has bereft me of all save my honour," he said slowly. "Must I sell that as well to pay in

part the debt I owe you? Is there no other way?"

She saw that he was not addressing her and remained silent until his frown passed. But her heart sank, for how could she ask him now to set the prisoner free.

"If I could see the President," she urged, "perhaps——"

"It would not be for good," he assured her earnestly. "His Excellency is inflamed against your friends, and—I am his servant."

He communed with himself again, and suddenly his eyes lit up, his face cleared. He had seen suddenly how he might earn acquittance for the deed which had sundered them two for all time.

"In spite of that," he said in a glad voice, "I think—yes, I can promise you the service you require of me."

"That Mr. Meggs will not be—not be—shot?"

"No, he will not be shot. I promise that. Now come with me."

That night there was much traffic to and fro between the pickets, and the cordon about the besieged was drawn closer each time that Von Rudolf went the round, as he did at frequent intervals. A sortie from the stairfoot was repulsed after hard fighting, and then the garrison seemed satisfied that it was hemmed in too effectually to have any hope of breaking through.

His Excellency had decreed that Meggs should

suffer the last penalty in the disguise with which he had tricked the guileless General, and just before daybreak Von Rudolf strode back from the stable buildings beneath the *hacienda* to the camp on the ridge to see that all was ready and according to the instructions promulgated. His orderly was with him.

He passed into the guard-tent, sent the two warders there on watch away, and sat down beside Meggs.

Those outside could hear him conversing quietly with their prisoner for a few minutes, ere he called the guard in again, and once more went afield through the night, in the direction of the *hacienda*. But with themselves the condemned would exchange no word.

Ybarra was astir betimes and one of Von Rudolf's underlings had charge of the parade which formed up in the dark and started for the scene of execution in good time to reach it with the dawn. The President intended to impress the foreigners on watch above with the exactitude of justice as administered by himself: and to express his displeasure with Von Rudolf by the appointment of a subordinate to the stage-management of the display.

The man in woman's clothes and a long cloak who walked, in the dim light, beside the cart which held the coffin needed no help on that last stage of his earthly journey. The black and yellow men of the battalions rolled their eyes and nudged each other as they watched him. They were no cowards

in so far as fearing death went, and could appreciate cool courage.

The square was formed and one side opened out to let the bullets through. The sappers did their hasty work with pick and shovel, the firing-party took position as their target of his own accord passed to the place appointed for him.

The priest performed his part, they theirs, and then the body was consigned to an unconsecrated grave.

And, from the cliff above, a bugler sounded the *Last Post*, to mark a comrade's passing.

CHAPTER XV

THE BOTTOMLESS PIT

"WHERE'S Fifi," Meggs repeated stupidly. "She's in the chapel. Von Rudolf had her hidden in the stables—she had been to his camp to plead for me—he helped me to escape in his own uniform—I brought her through the tunnel with me, and his orderly—an Austrian—came with us.

"But they've shot some one in my place. Who was it?"

Fifi came forth from where she had been praying, and with her was Von Rudolf's servant.

He looked up at the sun, showing above the Horseshoe rim, and down to where the sappers were still shovelling.

"My master, Count Von Rudolf, sent me here," he said, with military brevity, and most respectfully, "to say that he has kept his promise to the Fräulcin Florian, and will have no more need of me. I am to hold myself at her disposal."

Meggs turned with twitching lips and laid a hand on Corbyn's arm.

"Von Rudolf took my place, then," he said brokenly. "If I had—— God! If I had only known in time!"

Fifi had heard the message, seen the messenger's mute gesture, and she also understood. A hopeless horror of the web of fate struck at her heart. Hot tears rose to her eyes. And Beatriz Ybarra also fell a-weeping as she heard how a gallant gentleman had paid the price of honour, settling the debit of an accidental death with his own life.

They went away together to the altar. And Von Rudolf's restless soul was surely none the worse of their pure prayers.

The next news from the ridge came in the shape of a plugged shell which whistled past the watchers on the cliff and struck the main tower of the *hacienda*.

Corbyn looked round at the cloud of falling plaster, and caught Allardyce's eye.

"That was a good shot," he said coolly, glad to be thus recalled from his mournful self-communing. "His Excellency's gunners have improved since I last saw their practice."

"I know who fired it," O'Dare broke in. "He has a German snake called Schweitzer in his employment, who was on board the *Mariposa* with us; a perfect marvel with explosives of all sorts. Yes, it was he who sank the *Hilario*; it took a second shot, because I spoiled his first for him."

"They can't do us much harm," said Corbyn, "and if they blow the buildings about too much we've bomb-proof shelter for an army underground."

"But we don't want to stay here all our lives,"

objected Allardyce, "and I can see no way out while they want to keep us in.

"It's like Gibraltar in a great cock-pit; safe enough, but sure to become monotonous."

A second shell with the plug drawn bit viciously at the bare rock beneath them. The air was filled with fragments of flying metal, splinters of stone. But these fell back into space.

"Six feet too low," Corbyn remarked critically, "and just as well for us that it was. We'll dig a shelter-trench for the lookout to-night; and meantime we'll take cover. They've spotted us, and, if friend Schweitzer drops a calling-card in our midst, there will be trouble."

They scattered and crept by circuitous routes into the chapel stairway, which was roofed in by solid rock, where they swore in their new recruit, Von Rudolf's man, and, having assigned him to safe duty, held anxious consultation as to their next move.

"We have a fighting force of twenty-two all told," said Corbyn, "including him; three wounded men; two women. Our food supply is very scanty, and there seems small hope of increasing it. Water is plentiful, but—we can't live long on that alone.

"We can't afford to make a dash for liberty lest we should lose all we have gained so far, and, furthermore, we have no means of transportation.

"In short—we can't stay here, and neither can we get away.

"Who can suggest a remedy?"

For some time no one spoke; then Allardyce had an inspiration and expressed it eagerly.

"There's not much chance for us outside," he agreed. "Why not try inside!"

"The tunnel to the stable's very simple now we know it, and—there may be other——"

"You're thinking of that horrible hole we skirted on our way up," Meggs interrupted, and the other nodded.

"And of the water-gate through the ridge," he continued. "The country around here's all volcanic; a crack or crevice may lead anywhere—or nowhere.

"It's worth while rooting about below."

"Let's have Gonzalez in," suggested Meggs, "and put him through the third degree about the Golden Horseshoe. I'll bet he knows all the back-doors there are.

"But let me tell you one thing: the water-gate's well guarded now. They must have found your horses, too. While I was in their hands I saw them working at a fresh entrenchment on the ridge above the reservoir, just where the stream runs through."

A muffled crash told them that the bombardment was still going forward, but they were not concerned as to the damage being done Ybarra's property, and all their men were safely bestowed. Corbyn and Allardyce crossed to the stairway, where their main-guard had its quarters and brought Gonzalez back with them.

The spy was very servile now and could not do enough for them. The fear that they would turn him over to the Tiger was ever before his eyes, and he was voluble in his assurances that he would tell them every secret of the underground.

But all that he could tell them proved of little practical assistance. The tunnel was the only secret exit from the *hacienda*, and he had never heard of any attempt to plumb the abyss therein.

"We'll let you down in a rope if you'd like to try it," Allardyce said laughingly, but to the traitor there was no jest in the idea, and his knees knocked under him while he was begging that they would not thus torture him.

"It is the open door of hell," he whispered with pale lips. "Many have passed within, but none come out again. And sometimes there is heat, and smoke, and voices crying—even His Excellency was afraid——"

Corbyn smiled at the ingenuous implication, and they got rid of Gonzalez.

"How are we off for rope?" he asked, and O'Dare, upon whom had devolved a quartermaster's duties, answered, "Hundreds of yards. One of the barns behind is stocked like a sailmaker's shop."

"Let's have a shot at the bottle, Corbyn. What do you say? I claim first shy."

"Some of us must stay here, and—I don't know. Well, there's no harm in trying; but be very cautious."

"Take men enough to pull you up again. Meggs may go with you to take charge of them. You'd better stay with me, Allardyce, and—there's another shell. We must be watchful lest they should attack us unawares."

Allardyce was disappointed, in that the idea had occurred to him and he had intended to volunteer for the trial trip. But he kept silence and the other two went off with all celerity to carry out their purpose.

They levied on the barn of which O'Dare had spoken for sufficient rope to reach below ground level from the height of the *hacienda*, enlisted from among the men a sufficient number of sympathizers, took with them lamps and candles, and passed down the tunnel to the bottle-mouth.

"We'll cross and work it from the other side," said Meggs, looking distastefully into the ominous opening.

"We'll have more purchase for a long pull on the down-grade. But first I'll send a scout down ahead of you to find out if there's any foul air below."

He lowered a lighted candle set in a triangle of wire at the end of a thin cord and paid out all there was in the hank he held, while O'Dare, peering after it from the edge of the gallery, reported its progress.

"Yes, it's still burning," he remarked, when Meggs had reached the end of his long line and drawn the light up again. "The atmosphere's all right, but—it must be a devil of a depth."

"I'll let the whole thing drop," responded the other. "The sound should be audible, I think."

He let the line go, and O'Dare listened most intently, but no echo whatsoever came up to him.

He screwed up his nose and clapped his hands together.

"It's eerie, isn't it!" he said. "Come on across and help me tie myself in a safe knot."

Meggs would fain have urged him not to go further in the matter, but knew better than to confirm him in his resolution by doing so. However, he reserved in his own mind the right to pull him up when he thought proper.

And presently O'Dare slipped gently over the lower lip in a reclining posture, securely fastened to the rope that Meggs and his assistants were slowly paying out. With him he had a lamp and in his pockets plentiful candles. A signal line was made fast to the rope at a point well within his reach.

"Yes, I'm safely over," he called back to them. "The edge is smooth as ice—there's no fear of the rope fraying. Lower away now till I signal *Stop*, and, Jerry! Don't pull me up before I'm ready."

They paid out foot by foot the long coil they had laid out on the steps behind them, and with each went an equal length of signal line. Meggs kept his hand on that, and when, after what seemed an endless interval, no sign came from below, he made his crew hold fast.

They did so; three strong tugs brought the command "Lower away." Unwillingly did Meggs comply, and, when they had to stop to splice a fresh length to the depleted coil, the three tugs thrice repeated showed how impatient to proceed was the explorer.

"Confound him!" Meggs snapped, his mind divided between annoyance and anxiety. "If he's not satisfied with fifty or a hundred feet more we'll yank him up out of that."

But, notwithstanding, he had allowed the limit to pass before from out of the depths a single pull said "Stop."

Corbyn and Allardyce had not been idle while the other two were busy. They timed the shells and found that they were arriving at fairly regular intervals of five minutes. Waiting till one had fallen and exploded they reached the open air, and set out on a tour of inspection.

At the stairway all was well. The men within the solid walls at top were sitting under shelter, passing the time at cards with cartridges for currency. There was no superfluity of ammunition among them now. An extra round might well mean life itself ere they were through. Which added zest to the uncertainty of euchre.

At the loopholes on ground-level the lookouts were alert, but there was nothing to be seen on the wide expanse before them, and on either hand the plain lay empty till the sheer, shoe-shaped rock, face

shut it in. Round the circular curve of their great natural fortress they could not of course see, but even although the huts and barns and houses there had been alive with men it would not have disturbed their equanimity.

They clambered up the winding stair again, and, always watchful for the shrieking missiles which came hurtling out of space with such monotonous attachment to a set time, passed through the wrecked rooms underneath the brick and plaster tower, reaching the outhouses behind without mischance.

There they found much to interest them among the medley of pseudo-scientific playthings with which, it appeared, Ybarra had been wont to amuse himself during his frequent sojourns at the *hacienda*. There was a great profusion of ill-kept chemical apparatus, broken machinery, drawings, models, of every modern ambition from air-ships to armoured motor-cars and quick-firing cannon.

Allardyce poked and pried among them, noting everything that might serve any practical purpose, and one of his finds called forth an exclamation of satisfaction so fervent that Corbyn, who had been frowning perplexedly over the scantlings of a miniature flying-machine, jumped round to see what had happened. The Englishman was stooping over a stack of strangely shaped cylinders which occupied one corner of the adjoining chamber. He rose as his friend came forward, and "Corbyn, old chap," said he, "this looks like the left bower to me.

Ybarra's kept two or three good cards up his sleeve."

Corbyn looked carefully, first at the cylinders, then at the corner opposite, and jotted some figures down in his note-book as Allardyce had already done.

"It would be a deadly risk," he muttered reflectively, "but—we'll see, Allardyce. I wish we had a flying-machine like that model in there."

"If we had the Tiger would have good cause to grit his teeth," answered the Englishman.

They resumed their perquisition, ransacking every nook before they were satisfied. And after that they made a tour of inspection round the rim of their plateau, peering down from convenient points on the buildings underneath the overhanging ledge at the back, talking over their find. They finished at the garden-front, where they found their troop-sergeant stretched at his ease in the long grass, audibly cursing the contrariety of the dice with which he had been diverting himself since he had lost interest in Schweitzer's gun-play.

Allardyce sat down beside him, and Corbyn went back to headquarters on the chapel-stairs, there to make endless calculations on the basis of the ciphers in his note-book. He finished, and, as he leaned back, tapping his teeth with his pencil in cogitation, his forehead wrinkled, he heard the two girls come down the aisle within from the altar. A sudden inspiration came to him, and, as he pulled the door open for them, his face was radiant.

"Can you sew, Beatriz?" he asked. "Fifi, are you any sort of needlewoman?"

They smiled, somewhat surprisedly, and answered that they would most willingly display such skill in that capacity as they possessed.

"I'll make a contract with you, then," he suggested jocularly, "at a fair price per foot. Time is our money, and I'll shorten your imprisonment here by half an hour for each inch you turn out.

"Wait till the next shell strikes and I'll show you what's to do."

Allardyce focussed his field-glasses on the ridge, and, for a time, sat silent, watching the group about the gun, which he was able to locate the first time that the flash of smokeless powder announced the despatch of another shell. He saw the gun-squad sponging out, and, after they had reloaded, they crossed to another piece, which presently belched flame. Four more were fired, and then the first again.

"They've a complete field-battery trained on us," he remarked to McGuire, "and they've got the range to a nicety. When the time comes they'll let us have it hot and strong."

"Faith, thin, I've always liked it best that way!" replied the Irishman, a twinkle in his eyes, "whether 'twas soup or shindy or potheen. It's thirsty work this waiting, Misther Allardyce."

"I don't think we'll have long to wait now," Allardyce returned. "They're forming their men

up—a full parade, both horse and foot. Yes, we'll see something doing shortly."

He kept his eyes glued to the glasses, and McGuire gave up his game of matching right hand against left to stare through the hot sunshine at the ridge.

"I wish you'd see if you can find the Captain," Allardyce said at length. "Tell him the other camp is all astir, and that I think they mean to march this way. I'll wait here till you get back."

McGuire saluted with precision and went on his errand in great glee. He signalled to the stairhead as he passed that they might presently find more exciting occupation than the dealing of cold decks, while Allardyce, on watch, observed the start of the advance he had anticipated, and all the time Schweitzer's slow minute-guns maintained their service.

A company marched out of camp and halted on the plain. Another followed it, and drew up at some distance to the rear.

The Englishman gave vent to a disgusted grunt as he saw what came next—a battery of guns, but horsed and manned; which showed that there were two of them at least at the besiegers' disposal. With them there were two troops of cavalry, and close behind another company of foot.

That column started on the war-path and a fresh one formed on its ground.

"Three complete batteries!" commented Allardyce. "A thousand men to wipe out twenty-one!

My sainted aunt! but they're a bold lot in San Benito. Where's Corbyn? I wish McGuire would get a move on."

The supporting column followed the advance, and, in its place, appeared a third and last, which, at due intervals, came on in rear.

"They think they're going to scare us stiff," the watcher whispered to himself, "with fifteen hundred men. I don't think any one could ask a prettier proposition. Things will be far from peaceful presently.

"What's that, McGuire?"

"There's something wrong in the tunnel, sor," that breathless messenger repeated, "and Captain Corbyn has gone down to see about it.

"He'll be with you immejitly."

Allardyce rose and ran, under an urgent impulse to discover for himself whether or no O'Dare was safe, but duty still more urgent plucked at his shoulder, turning his face toward the main-guard, where the brunt of any onfall must be borne.

The men there had their rifles ready and looked up with eager eyes as he appeared.

"Yes, they'll be at us soon," he said in answer to their inquiries. "Whenever you see Captain Corbyn tell him I'm with the quarter-guard below."

He hurried through them, down the interminable steps, to where the four men at the stairfoot were peering out at the approaching army. Its leading column came on stolidly to well within short rifle-

range, and then he sent a single warning shot towards them.

They halted, and took open order, but with indifferent slowness. Their battery unlimbered and the guns were laid. One shell, placed properly, must have made the stairfoot a shambles.

But the time was not yet.

The second and third columns had disappeared behind the *hacienda* ere a bugle sounded from in front of Allardyce's post, and there rode forward one who carried a long lance with a white flag atop. Another cantered at his heels, without arms.

They came on fearlessly and Allardyce went out to meet them, saluting courteously as Ygnacio Ybarra drew rein.

"I wish to speak with Corbyn, the American," the President began abruptly. "Send word to him that——"

"I represent him here, señor," answered the younger man.

Ybarra looked down at him from under lowering brows. "You will have learned to obey me without question before long," he said, and his tone was very menacing. But the implied threat did not seem to disconcert its object, and evoked no reply.

"Tell him," continued His Excellency, "that I came here from motives of clemency, that he might have a last chance to surrender and so escape in part the punishment he merits. That——"

"I think that you had better get back to your lines, in that case," said a suave voice, and Corbyn stepped out at Allardyce's side. "Mere words, from you, have little meaning, and—we're ready."

The President of San Benito glared most murderously at his arch-enemy, muttered some blasphemy beneath his beard, and, wheeling his horse with one cruel wrench of the wrist, galloped back to the guns.

"Make fire!" he screamed, and at the order all six fuses snapped simultaneously. A single explosion rent the air, while the shells spattered on the rock around the stairfoot, and, at that signal, both the other columns opened fire from the positions they had taken up, while from the ridge hummed chilled steel bolts which fell upon the *hacienda* in an infernal hail.

Corbyn, on his way up the winding stair with Allardyce at his elbow and his men preceding him, heard the shrapnel burst in the guard-chamber underneath.

"We're going to be very busy," he opined, "and at an inconvenient moment.

"Poor Denny's missing, Allardyce, and I'm afraid——"

"Not in the pit! Not in the pit!"

"Yes, in the pit."

CHAPTER XVI

IN DESPERATION

YGNACIO YBARRA felt that he was being hardly used by fate. Scarcely had he set foot in camp on his return from witnessing the execution which had afforded him such lively satisfaction when he discovered on his desk a most astounding message from the dead man.

It told him, in curt terms, that his most trusted General had, for some reason unexplained, but doubtless foolishly quixotic, assumed the guise of the condemned, ransomed him with his own life.

He had feared and disliked Von Rudolf, had always intended to rid himself of the Austrian; but not before he should have made full use of him. To lose him thus and in the midst of crisis was maddening. It was as though the servant had dismissed his master, and that when his master needed his services most. His Excellency, biting his nails in impotent anger, growled like a beast as he glared at the paper before him. He dared not tell the troops of the mistake made in the dusk of dawn, lest they should turn and rend him because of it.

Von Rudolf had been far more popular among

the men than he, and since the pay-chest had run dry, only the dead man's popularity had held together the regiments on the ridge. These had been reinforced by guns and cavalry, but there was discontent and insubordination among all arms and the sole salve for these was money.

He had been counting on the insurance money due him for the *Hilario* to tide him over till he could lay hands on his recalcitrant cousin again, but that the New York underwriters refused to pay, holding that a man who is foolish enough to insure a ship and then sink her deliberately is well off if he escape prosecution for conspiracy to defraud.

He knew only too well that no more was to be wrung from his impoverished country, and since Quentin Sariol had been at work its foreign credit also had been cut short. He cursed Don Quentin savagely in all his works and ways, and fate rewarded him with a long cipher message from Alta Cruz, in which the Vice-President explained that the Red Revolution had achieved proportions unbelievable, that he felt quite incapable of coping with it, and that it would be for the good of all concerned if President Ybarra would tear himself away from his private affairs at the *hacienda* and once more take up the cares of state. There was even a veiled threat in the wording of it, and a postscript, which conveyed the news that a strong insurgent force had surrounded the capital, asked instant and explicit instructions.

“The dog!” His Excellency snarled when he had mastered this. “He knows that I am tied here and is shaping matters so that, if I seem to shirk issue with the Reds, he may step into my shoes and make terms with them for his own advancement. But there is only room for one ruler in San Benito! I’ll show him that the Tiger has sharp teeth as well as claws.”

He took deep thought and called a council of the senior officers, sour and unsmiling men with many grievances, to whom he put the matter with engaging frankness.

“Our friend, Von Rudolf,” he said smilingly, “has had to leave us at an anxious time, but I could not spare any of you others, and it will be for a few days only.

“Meantime and until he gets back with the gold he has gone for, I have decided to advance out of my private pocket a sufficient sum to settle all outstanding pay-sheets.

“The savings of a lifetime spent in the service of our country are insignificant, but—all that there is I shall devote to the reduction of the debt I owe you and your men.”

Encouraged by the signs of approval which greeted this most welcome and unexpected statement, he went on smoothly: “Don Quentin Sariol sends word that the Reds have besieged Alta Cruz. Our duty calls us thither. I would not have it said that we, responsible for the good government of our

afflicted Fatherland, were absent from its capital at such a moment. I put it to you frankly, whether we should leave those filibustering foreigners in full possession of the Golden Horseshoe, wherein, unfortunately for us all, are locked away my poor resources against poverty, or,—seize the *hacienda* first and then——”

“If you have funds concealed there, in God’s name let us storm the place,” broke in a grizzled colonel of artillery. “Alta Cruz will be too hot to hold us if we march back with empty pockets, with neither cash nor credit.”

“Well said,” agreed an officer of cavalry whose threadbare uniform proclaimed his impecunious plight.

The others growled unanimous assent. “Our men are mutinous and disaffected,” they said bluntly. “While there is treasure hidden in the *hacienda* we stay here.”

“But we must act,” Ybarra argued. “What boots it to sit still and blow my buildings into ruins!”

“Let us attack then,” snapped their spokesman. “Are twenty men to hold at bay an army?”

His Excellency rose, well pleased that he had gained a point of such importance by a stratagem so simple. He had been half afraid that, knowing him for what he was, they would desert his standard. Their gullibility, in spite of past experience, gave him fresh confidence.

"We will attack within the hour," he said decisively, "with our full fighting force. Sheer weight of numbers will enable us to overwhelm the enemy. Let your men know that, once we hold the *hacienda*, there will be ample funds wherewith to satisfy their just demands—with interest in the shape of a month's pay additional for all ranks. And, in Von Rudolf's absence, I shall lead in person. I hold the only key to the position."

He watched them hasten off, and, as one after another reached his lines and spread the glad news without ceremony, there arose a dull buzz which presently broke into a thin, crackling semblance of applause.

"*Viva el Presidente!*" was its burden, and don Ygnacio, standing at his tent-door, smiled with sardonic pleasure as he saw the train that he had lit burn without further blowing on his part.

He meant to make his promise good if that were absolutely necessary, after the place was taken, by forcing Beatriz to sign a draft upon her bankers for the few thousand dollars it would take to keep his troops in temper. What plunder he had hidden in the *hacienda* was in the shape of bonds and share certificates which he could not by any means negotiate while he held office. And, furthermore, they formed the nucleus of that capital with which he hoped, when he had added a sufficiency, to make himself more or less independent of his cousin's millions. His final goal was Paris, where it would not be

pleasant to exist quite on sufferance and at the caprice of a wealthy wife.

He turned into the tent and got himself into a gorgeous uniform in time to inspect the miniature columns as they marched past on their way to the parade-ground.

The ragged rank and file glanced up to where he stood as they went by, and he could see how much the prospect he had held out had encouraged them. They were all eager for the fray, had no fear of defeat. Those left behind to guard the ridge were grumbling for that they were not to take part in the killing that was toward.

He took his place in front of the first column, and the advance commenced. At the last moment he thought fit to attempt a bloodless victory, and rode into the stairfoot to demand surrender. It would have given him much more pleasure to hang the garrison piecemeal afterwards than to dispose of them from a distance in bulk. But his interview with Allardyce and Corbyn upset his temper terribly, and then the guns began to thunder. He knew that most of their fire was ineffectual, but counted on its moral effect to frighten the besieged before it should be time to assault the stairway, while every single man that the shells should dispose of would be one less to withstand the stormers there.

A ceaseless shower from Schweitzer's battery on the ridge was falling on the flat table-land above, and segregating the two parties into which the de-

fence had perforce fallen. One of which held the stairway, while the other was confined to the chapel passage whereby the tunnel entrance might be reached. Between them there was no communication possible while the cruel shrapnel swept the intervening space.

Ybarra left his own gun-squads hard at work, and cantered round to where his second column was directing its fire at the cliff-edge above the stables. It angered him sorely that he should have to disclose his cherished secret, but, since that must be, he would be prompt about it.

“Lay two guns on the centre of that ivy-patch beyond the middle roof,” he ordered. “There lies the passage by which we must gain footing on the plateau.”

Two or three bursting shells tore the green screen apart, and then they sent in solid shot until, upon the bare rock-face, there showed a black spot which was the tunnel entrance.

A nod from him and word went spurring to begin the assault on the stairway, while he slipped from his saddle, and went forward afoot with the infantry who were to enter by his private access. From the third column, idle at the rear, either of those actively engaged could obtain reinforcement at short notice. The field-guns had ceased fire, but those on the ridge maintained their raking and continuous discharge.

The little, wiry linesmen raced each other to the stairfoot, and went swarming up, regardless of the

certain death which waited those who led as soon as they should turn the corner which concealed the strangely silent enemy. Their fellows following were thrusting forward. A seething wave went swirling upwards until its crest came into contact with a sheet of flame, and broke, and toppled over, and fell back, blood red.

Allardyce and his men had held their hands until time's clock ticked out the crucial moment.

And then began a battle such as no man would take part in twice of his own choice. A battle as between wild beasts penned into a close cage, while the dead weight of multitudes of others pressed them to such close contact that it was barely possible to move. For those above had built a battlement of boulders which completely blocked the narrow way, and four of them were fighting on the outside, while from within and overhead there spat the vicious sparks before which men with glaring eyeballs bowed blindly down, and were trampled underfoot ere they could rise again.

Therewith an outcry as of hell itself let loose, a shrill, insistent, wailing discord keyed to the uttermost of agony.

The four in front were working with clubbed carbines and for a time they managed to keep foothold clear, but, from behind the writhing heap about their feet, one of the storming-party managed to pull trigger and one of Allardyce's men fell limply forward.

"Climb back!" he shouted to the other two, and

they obeyed while he beat off the hands that would have held them by the heel. The muzzles at his shoulders belched, and, while the gap their bullets made about him still endured, he in turn was pulled upwards into temporary safety.

Immediately the wave crest surged against the barricade, rose and curled foaming down the slope, came on again with the same sullen fury. But it had plucked another of the defenders from off their slippery breakwater. He dived, head foremost, disappeared in the dark undertow, a shapeless pulp. Until, at length, the tide's resistless strength overtopped every obstacle, lapped to the barrier-lip, splashed down within.

Ybarra's men had met with no resistance at the tunnel mouth, but found the inner door securely closed against them. Sappers were ordered forward, and these soon had that demolished. Beyond it, all was dark. They did not dare to show a light lest it should bring down on them so much the earlier the inevitable tempest. Shoulder to shoulder they crept upwards, carrying ladders with them to bridge the gulf ahead. Once started there was no stop possible. The solid phalanx was kept moving by the relentless pressure at its base. It almost seemed as though they might pass unmolested when, without warning, death came whistling down the tunnel.

The echo of the carbines up above, intensified in that Cimmerian burrow, was like the crack of doom. A groan of horror mingled with it. But for those

who must face them there was no release, and foot by foot they were pushed forward.

The first discharge had done small damage, however. The bullets splashed and ricocheted on the walls, filling the air with flying splinters which cut deep but did not kill. It is not easy to aim truly in gross darkness. Wherefore, and also to avoid discovering their whereabouts, the men in front did not fire back.

One or two fell before the fusillade that was kept up against them, but others took their places, and when these in turn had borne the brunt there was no lack of bearers for the ladders. Their only hope now lay in emerging from the trap they had so blindly entered. One slipped and fell, but forwards, and another followed him. Their screams came from below, and it was obvious that this was where the ladders must be laid. It cost a dozen more lives to lay them evenly from edge to slippery edge of the pit-mouth, but, that accomplished, fifty men out of a hundred scrambled over. And the last was Ybarra. By his direction the remainder halted and lay down. They were to reinforce him when he should have gained the crypt, and meantime he himself need not be forced forward by them, while, if the fifty failed, he would avail himself of the alcove-like gallery as to whose existence all were ignorant except himself, and thence throw further forces forward until the day was won.

He felt his way along the ledge, and, sheltered

there from any risk of a stray shot, listened intently to the turmoil raging beyond. A sulphurous stench assailed his nostrils, and he was almost deafened by the uproar, but over all he heard the sound of sobs from underneath and shivered as he thought of the black gulf there.

Ten men were far too few to hold the tunnel, and there were only ten to withstand the assault. Corbyn, Meggs, and eight others had made up their minds to do or die in the pitch darkness, and they were very busy doing.

One of them fell and then another as the fifty fought them backwards step by step. They gave way, to charge down again, regaining their lost ground, but every enemy they overbore was speedily replaced, while the two gaps in their own ranks could not be filled, and very shortly a third occurred, leaving them only seven strong.

The odds were too unequal, and, in spite of the most desperate efforts, they were unable to hold their own. Inch after inch they ceded. Meggs slipped and fell among the ensanguined moving bodies over which the combat was perforce conducted, and the remaining six knew that their plight was practically hopeless. They were already at the crypt door. Three of them passed through and reloaded, firing point blank over their comrades' heads into the swarm beyond, and, by the flash, saw that a fresh detachment of troops was on the point of crossing the chasm.

Corbyn had opened his mouth to bid the others back through and leave him, when there came rumbling upwards out of the very bowels of earth the blast of a most soul-sickening explosion.

Ybarra's ears had been throbbing to the infernal din about him, but throughout he had kept his head and so been able to follow the course of events with sufficient accuracy to despatch his supports when they were most likely to turn the tide of battle in his favour. He heard the crypt-door clang, and cried to those who waited that they should advance. The impulse they would lend to the exhausted fighting line should surely settle matters, and there were plenty more behind to take a hand within the chapel.

He saw success within his grasp, and was about to congratulate himself upon his generalship, when the clutch of two hands about his ankles all but caused him to lose his balance and so fall toppling into space. He leaned against the rough-hewn rock behind him and kicked hard, a cold sweat breaking out upon his brow. The sobbing he had heard was real, not imaginary. There was some creature crouching there beside him. The skin upon his head contracted. His superstitious horror of the place came back to him tenfold. He would have fled but that the hands held fast.

And then the explosion came.

Warm, sticky smoke spat up from underfoot and choked his lungs. A thin, blue, lambent flame lit up a picture unforgettable. In front of him, and

overhanging it, were the frail ladders over which his men were thrusting. Above, the rock-roof, ghastly in that unearthly glare. Beneath, a seething cauldron filled with vapour, twisted and torn into strange shapes and shot with corposant-like lights which rose and fell and floated there like souls in purgatory. Upon the ledge and holding him above that hell wherefrom there echoed and re-echoed after the first infernal thunder a most blood-curdling chorus, shrieks and groans as of anguish beyond bearing, devilish laughter, lay Joaquin Gonzalez.

Ybarra's nerves were racked to utmost tension, but at the sight of this man all the human beast in him awoke, stifling the terror which had almost overmastered him.

"Judas!" he hissed, leaning forward to loosen the twining fingers, and, as the spy looked up at him out of lack-lustre eyes from which all intelligence had fled, "Judas!" he cried aloud again, spitting.

The noisome fog was choking him, he was alone there, without strength to save himself, but he stood watching while the body he had launched forth fell whirling into the inferno.

A red-gold glare replaced the pale light which had first shot up, the rumbling grew still more insistent, ominous.

His knees gave way beneath him. He collapsed.

CHAPTER XVII

THE ROLL-CALL

"A LIGHT here—quick!" cried Corbyn from the crypt, and Fifi Florian ran forward with a torch.

An impulse irresistible had drawn her from the chapel where Beatriz and she had spent upon their knees that seemingly interminable space of time for which the fighting had endured.

He snatched it from her and dived down into the swirling clouds which choked the tunnel, thrusting it here and there, from face to face of the dead men who filled it. He disappeared from view, and two of those above went after him.

They found him swaying on his feet by the immobile body of Gerald Meggs lying beneath a pile of others, and bade him mount again while they would bring it up. But he stayed with them and together they achieved their object, carrying their comrade back to the crypt, where they forthwith fell headlong and for long lay as if dead.

The women tended them, and, afterwards, when they had in some measure regained consciousness, turned to the body they had brought.

It they took through into the chapel, setting them-

selves to save the life that lingered in it. For a faint, intermittent heart-beat told them that Meggs had yet a slender chance.

Corbyn staggered to his feet, and, by the torch-light, saw his men still standing guard at the crypt-door which gave upon the tunnel. The two who had gone down into the depths with him were struggling to sit up, and it was evident that they would soon be fit for further service.

The acrid reek which filled the passage underneath would safeguard its defenders for a space. He made his way up, through the chapel, into the open air, and Beatriz Ybarra shuddered as he passed her where she and Fifi were kneeling over Meggs. It was the first time she had seen the gentlemanly Corbyn in such case and his face frightened her.

At hazard he held straightly for the stairhead, despite the shells that Schweitzer was still showering on the plateau, and, as he reached his objective, Allardyce's men came streaming up the last steps and threw themselves face downwards at his feet. Allardyce followed and pulled Corbyn to earth beside him.

A sheet of flame shut the pursuit off, a rending blast seemed to shake the whole earth, and from below came one short, despairing yell. Then silence.

They lifted their heads and listened: rose with wild eyes, and, staring strangely at each other, crept to the crumbling cliff-edge.

As they drew back again Allardyce spoke with shaking voice: "I had to do it," he said. "They had us beaten otherwise."

Corbyn laid a soothing hand upon his shoulder. "They brought it on themselves," he answered, "and I shall answer with you for it when the time comes."

They turned away, leaving sufficient men to picket the now almost inapproachable stairway. The others they sent to the crypt, and, as they themselves crept across the garden to espy the tunnel-entrance, "How did you do it?" Corbyn asked quietly.

"A charge of picric. I saw some lying in that laboratory behind the barn when we were there this morning and thought of it at the last moment. McGuire volunteered to fetch it across for me—he's a brave fellow, that!—and while we fought he pried a step up and so tamped it thoroughly. It's a most terrible explosive!"

"I think that you were justified in every way," his friend reassured him, "although it was a grave risk to yourselves as well.

"By Jove! Look there."

Allardyce looked, and "God!" he cried: "What's happened?"

The stables were wreathed in grey clinging smoke, out of which stumbled now and then dark figures. Which fell, and rose, and scrambled forward, swaying, and rolled over, and lay still. Beyond them, where their column had been drawn up,

the plain was empty. But to the right, in the direction of the ridge, there was a moving mass and far ahead of them guns, galloping, in full retreat.

"I don't quite know what happened," Corbyn answered, "but I believe we're living over a volcano."

"And Denny?"

"Denny has perished in it."

They waited there till the first fugitives had reached the distant camp, and then the shell-fire ceased, enabling them to satisfy themselves that the siege had been raised all round.

Wherewith they went back to the chapel and found to their intense relief that Meggs was showing signs of a return from that black bourne he had been on the point of crossing.

And Corbyn, all blood-stained and begrimed and spent with battle, sat down at Beatriz Ybarra's feet where she was busy with a roll of bandages. She said no word, but laid a hand gently on his bowed head. A golden curl brushed past his cheek, and something else touched it with pitiful tenderness. Then she went on with her work.

Allardyce had already recovered his sang-froid. He call the roll and counted his survivors.

Sixteen were left out of the twenty-one who had taken part in the defence, and eight of these were subjects for a surgeon.

Von Rudolf's man had fallen, fighting bravely, and four others. It seemed most marvellous that any should have escaped at all.

Gonzalez must be set down missing, and as for O'Dare—he stopped, and sighed, in memory of one more comrade who had joined the great majority. There were so many now, but none he would miss more than that staunch ally in adversity.

He posted six of his eight sound men at points of vantage, took a fresh torch, passed through the crypt with the remaining two, and tried the tunnel. The smoke had partially cleared, and he was able to make his way by degrees, through the dead bodies there, to the pit-mouth. At that point also all was silent. The scaling-ladders still lay where they had been left when the panic-stricken attack had turned and fled.

He tipped them over the edge. They fell without a sound.

Turning towards the ledge, he passed around the gallery, and, at its narrowest, found Ybarra lying in a huddled heap.

He called his two assistants and they carried that limp body also into the crypt.

“He’s dead, no doubt,” said Allardyce, “but we’ll make sure before we bury him.”

A hasty survey of the lower stretch of stair showed that it was comparatively clear, and then he turned back to attend the President.

“He’s not dead yet,” Corbyn whispered to him with dry lips, “and I suppose that we must not take justice into our own hands.

“Will you look after him, Allardyce?”

The Englishman nodded, knowing the dire temptation, since it had come to him also. It would have been so very easy to send what looked like a corpse after the ladders into the abyss.

He set to work in a far corner with such resources as were available, and, after much patient effort, was rewarded by some symptom of returning animation; a faint, almost imperceptible movement of the eyelids, a respiration scarce discernible.

Meggs had pulled round already and came shuffling over to ask if he could assist.

"Tell me about O'Dare, Jerry," Allardyce requested breathlessly. "I'll resurrect this criminal myself."

"We let him down till he signalled 'Stop,'" said Meggs in a lifeless, mechanical voice. "Then the rope swayed a good deal and we started to haul in without waiting for any order. But the weight was off it. We lowered it again and waited: waited till the attack was close on us, when we had to wind up or else let go altogether.

"It was cut clean through, signal-line and all, at the far end.

"How could that happen, Allardyce?"

"I can't imagine, Jerry, old chap. You mustn't fret about it. Denny would say the same if he were here."

Meggs passed restlessly onwards, but with dragging footsteps, and then turned back to ask, "Has the smoke cleared yet?"

"It was clearing rapidly when I came up," said Allardyce.

"I wish you'd help me when you're through here," begged Meggs. "I'm going down below to look for him."

A little later don Ygnacio Ybarra was out of danger, and Allardyce entrusted the further care of him to two of the less seriously wounded men, whom he provided with utensils for the prompt suppression of their prisoner in case that stormy petrel should show any signs of spreading his wings for flight.

"Treat him with all due respect—but don't stand any nonsense," he instructed them, and sought out Corbyn, who was once more occupied with all the cares of his almost desperate situation.

"The well's run dry," was his first greeting, and at that Allardyce looked very blank; "and we've only fifty-eight rounds of ammunition left," he added gloomily.

"Did Meggs tell you that he wants to go after Denny?" Allardyce asked after he had digested these unpleasant tidings.

"Yes, and I didn't like to stop him. He's terribly upset about it all, and—I wish you'd see to it that he does nothing rash. I'll send you warning if there's any move on the enemy's part towards the tunnel, but I don't think there will be at the moment."

That was all Allardyce had aimed at, and he went underground again in haste.

The bodies on the steps had been disposed of by the only method possible, that of consigning them to the dark gulf below, and when he reached its orifice he found Meggs actively engaged in preparation for the perilous descent thereinto.

The glare of torches and the fire his helpers had kindled in the cresset shewed a velvet blackness beneath, and, when they held their breaths to listen, utter silence reigned.

"I've sent a light down," Meggs remarked, "and it burned brightly at the limit of the line. The air's cleared. There must be some sort of ventilation below."

"Let me go in your place, old chap," Allardyce begged persuasively, but Meggs merely shook his head.

"You'll stay here, won't you, Allardyce?" said he, "and lower me until I'm satisfied? I've brought down a fresh coil of rope to lengthen this.

"Don't pull me up till I tell you to. That was the mistake I made, and it has cost us dearly."

He spoke quite briskly, and the other promised to observe his wishes. It was too late now to cavil.

So that Meggs went down into the depths without more words, to find out why his friend had not returned therefrom.

"His light's disappeared," reported the lookout man on the ledge, but Allardyce, despite his fears, paid fathom after fathom out until, to his unspeakable relief, the signal came to stop.

"Seems to be swinging a good deal," said the observer, and Allardyce, both hands on the rope, could feel it come and go a little while the men behind him held fast.

The weight went off it suddenly and a cold fear laid finger on his heart. What if another clean-cut, empty line were all they could recover from that most mysterious chasm!

For five long minutes which passed like five centuries he stood there motionless and mindful of his promise. A throb of thankfulness set his heart beating with fresh vigour as two emphatic tugs at the cord about his wrist said "Heave away."

"Shoulder the rope, McGuire, and haul down-hill," he said, and proceeded to pull hard, hand over hand.

It proved a harder task than he had anticipated, considering Meggs' light weight, and they had to pause twice to draw breath ere the outlook encouraged them with the announcement, "Light below!" And shortly after that a cheery shout of "Here he comes!" caused them to slow down lest their passenger should strike the rocks with violence unnecessary. And then his head and shoulders showed above the brim, and Allardyce cried in a scared voice, "Denny!"

He might have let the rope slip in his absolute amazement but that McGuire had hold of it far down the tunnel. And the grey ghost attached to its travelling end said, somewhat crossly, "Haul in,

you silly owl! For Heaven's sake, don't drop me!"

A final effort fetched him to safe footing, and, while Allardyce danced to and fro and slapped him on the shoulder, trying to find words to express his feelings but failing dismally, he stared about him with a vast contentment. And his drawn face relaxed a little as he said in softer tones, "Excuse my temper, Allardyce, but—I've had a trying time.

"We must get Jerry up at once. It isn't nice to be down there alone.

"Lower away until you reach the length he stopped you at, and then I'll show you how to ——"

He picked up a hank of cord, and, when McGuire, the cable-end about his waist, was once more close to them, knew there was rope enough out. He made one end of the cord fast to it, and led the other round the ledge to the lip opposite.

Two or three steady pulls set the rope swaying like a pendulum, and presently the outlook told them it had stopped.

"That means that Meggs has caught it," said O'Dare, and almost instantly there came the second signal to pull up.

With which it was not long before Meggs also came back from the tomb-like abyss; and in a state of mind which bore a strong resemblance to nervous prostration. His venture, on the top of his experiences of that morning, had taxed him to the uttermost.

They did not linger, therefore, but, having sent McGuire on in advance to break to their friends the news of O'Dare's most amazing resurrection, climbed upwards arm in arm.

Corbyn came through the crypt to meet them, while the two girls at the trap-door above could scarcely wait till he came forth to welcome him; and Fifi's eyes were full of thankful tears, and Beatriz Ybarra stammered as she spoke, and even the wounded men sat up to cheer.

Dennis was quite embarrassed by the warmth of his reception, and gradually the strained expression in his eyes gave place to one of calmer retrospect.

He told his story simply, in few words.

"A rock abutting hid my light when I was half-way down," he said, "and, of course, I lost sight of those above at the same moment. The funnel does not fall plumb, but curves inwards from that point.

"I could see that the rope was travelling in a groove on the rock-face above me; which showed that I was not by any means the first to explore the cavern. Otherwise I would have turned back then and there, for underneath I could see something moving.

"I was half-sick with fright, but knew that Jerry would run me up whenever I gave the word, and so went on until I saw to one side a smooth shelf. And on the wall behind it was an iron ring.

"I started swinging so that I might reach it, and very soon succeeded in doing so.

"Standing there, I came to the conclusion that

years must have passed since any one had set foot on it. The ring was rotting, the rock beneath was thickly coated with fine grey dust.

"Ahead of me I saw what looked like a rude doorway, and, of course, had to find out whether there was any chance for us through that. It was not idle curiosity that kept me going, I can tell you.

"But Jerry's knots proved too tough for my fingers. I had to cut the rope to free myself, and, most unfortunately, reached too high, with the result that I severed the signal-cord also, and in my anxiety to save that I lost my life-line. There I was stranded, with both of them dangling six or eight feet beyond my reach.

"I howled and shouted until I was hoarse; but could hear no reply. That was because the rock is honeycombed with openings which lead Heaven knows where, but evidently carry off all sound. I studied them on my way up.

"I was half frantic for a time, but judged that some one would come after me and plucked up heart to employ my time more usefully for all of us.

"The door was latched, without a lock, and on the inside"—his face blanched again, he spoke with twisted lips—"on the inside there was a grey monk sitting—on an oaken chest—his head hung forward beneath his cowl. I could have cried with cold terror! But, as I started back, he disappeared—melted away before my eyes—God! it was horrible.

"Nothing but sheer funk kept me from bolting

back past the spot where he had been sitting, and—flinging myself from the shelf. I'm thankful I was preserved from that.

"As soon as I could think, I knew, of course, that I had merely come across a mummy, and mustered up sufficient courage to root round and make some more investigations.

"The chest he had been sitting on was full of church plate—cups, and candle-sticks, and chalices, all solid gold—and there were others ranged behind it. I didn't open them, and only brought away one relic."

He drew forth from an inside pocket a little oblong volume bound in yellow boards that looked like horn, and Corbyn took it from him, turning over the thick, crackling leaves until he saw this superscription in thin, faded characters traced by a clerkly hand and very long ago:

"*Fray Jayme, Madryd, 1620,*" and underneath, "*Se fyl.*"

"'Be faithful,'" he translated the curt motto which had brought its owner overseas from Spain. "And he was very faithful, poor chap—even unto death.

"Will you let Beatriz have this missal, Denny? If all goes well with us we'll treasure it as a remembrance of you and our other comrades here, the living and the dead."

O'Dare assented willingly.

"Another iron ring at the far end of the treasure-

house attracted my attention, and after some trouble. I succeeded in divining its use. It was the handle to a solid slab of stone, set on a pivot, which served as a door, and I made up my mind to see what lay beyond that also.

"It gave on an inner chamber where the air was cool and pleasant. A flight of steps there led to a low cell, and down what looked like a long shaft in its back wall a strong wind was whistling.

"The opening was a very small one and there was a hinged iron plate held back at one side by a hasp. I slipped that and it closed at once, diverting the air-current into the chamber I had come through.

"Almost immediately I was half deafened by a horrible explosion and an infernal glare lit the place up like electricity.

"I bolted back, but fell, half choked, before I could reach the shelf I had landed on. The pit itself was vomiting like a volcano.

"I scrambled in again and closed the aperture at the end of the treasure-house to shut the smoke out, leaving myself once more in darkness but for the candle I had with me.

"A sudden inspiration caused me to wrench up the shaft cover, and then I got some inkling of the cause of trouble. Peering through, as though the sloping shaft had been a telescope, I saw, deep down below, the bubbling crater which will lie quiet while the ventilation suits it, but, if that is diverted, will wake up and spit the *hacienda* from its lips.

"It must have been the Spanish monks who harnessed it to make an actual hell, and at the end of all these centuries their machinery works perhaps more smoothly than it did with them.

"In any case, the uproar began to die away soon after I had released the air-current. The flames below burned out, and after an interval which seemed age-long I ventured to try the stone door again. Three times I had to close it hurriedly before the smoke cleared, but at last I got back to the shelf and sat there in the heat till I saw Jerry's light and knew that he had not forgotten me, as I had almost begun to fear. I felt as if I had been down there for endless ages."

He ceased and for a long time no one spoke. The tale he had told had almost been beyond belief but for the unassailable corroboration of the eruption they had witnessed. Thought of the agonies he must have suffered held them tongue-tied till a voice spoke from behind, a covetous, uncertain voice which grated strangely on their ears: "The *hacienda* of the Golden Horseshoe is my property, and mine alone," it said. "The treasure that you chanced upon is mine, all mine. I knew—I knew that it was there."

A lame and lying voice, little like that in which Ygnacio Ybarra was wont to make his statements. And no one answered it.

"Have you made up your mind yet, Corbyn?" Allardyce asked presently and his friend replied,

"Yes. Since there is no other way. I'll go—at nightfall."

"It would be perhaps as well to take His Excellency with you."

"Yes," Corbyn agreed again, "I'll take him with me."

"I'll go and get things ready, then," said Allardyce.

He went off with O'Dare, and all that afternoon the two worked together among the clump of trees behind the barns. With fire and cords and tubes and cylinders they followed all the formulæ that Allardyce had already set down on paper even as Corbyn had done. When all was ready they stopped to watch the sun set.

A gentle breeze was blowing from the inner rim of the great horseshoe shape which shut them in. The twinkling camp-fires on the far-off ridge burned brightly as it fanned them.

Allardyce turned to O'Dare and laughed. "The President will curse his passion for new toys when he sees how this one's going to serve us," said he, and, looking round, saw a small group advancing towards the clearing in which he and his companion stood.

Corbyn came forward first and cast the eye of a connoisseur over the silken sphere which swayed and rustled in its centre. Behind him, and somewhat shyly, appeared two comely boys, one dressed like a chauffeur, the other in a uniform. Ybarra, with hands tied behind his back and two armed

guards attending him, brought up the rear, and when he saw the great balloon, which he had believed to be damaged beyond repair, tug-tugging at its moorings, a moan of baffled rage broke from his lips, he struggled in his bonds until a peremptory order quieted him.

For the last time Allardyce went over every working-part, inspecting valves and cordage, car and stores. That to him was no new experience.

Then the two boys who were once girls climbed in, and the five free men there laid hands upon the President of San Benito, to such purpose that he was shortly trussed and ready for his aërial flight. But his place was underneath the car, not inside it.

All save he shook hands silently, and O'Dare almost broke down as he pressed Fifi's slender fingers for what might well prove the last time. None of them but felt the stress of parting very keenly, but, since it must be, Corbyn gave the word quickly. The moorings parted simultaneously under the ready knives.

A last good-bye came floating back from above the tree-tops and there were four lives hanging in the wind.

The moon had risen already and the wind seemed to be dropping. The great globe overhead was floating slowly northwards but at no great elevation.

"I didn't dare to put much ballast in, with all their weight on board," Allardyce said to O'Dare as they passed the torn and battered *hacienda* build-

ings on their way to the extreme point of the plateau, whence they might see their friends across the ridge. "It will be deadly dangerous for them if they don't rise. Schweitzer's a stunning marksman."

"I wish we had been able to send him word that Don Ygnacio's on board—or rather, under board—" returned O'Dare. "In any case they can drop him if it's impossible to reach a safe height otherwise."

Meggs came up behind and "Are they safely off?" he asked. "I said good-bye below. Corbyn set me at work which kept me there."

A distant bugle answered him and then another. The fires on the ridge went out with surprising suddenness. The enemy had already observed the fugitives, and was all alert.

"It's the explosive gas that I'm afraid of," Allardyce continued. "A bursting shell would blow them into smithereens. But—we were lucky to find even that, and with a little more luck they'll—Ah! damn you!"

A dull report had come up-wind, and the listening watchers knew that a shell had gone shrieking skywards with the dark image of a ghastly death astride it.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RED REVOLUTIONISTS

THE wires between La Bocá and Alta Cruz had not yet been repaired at all points, for the insurgent forces, gaining power and prestige with each day Ybarra delayed at the Golden Horseshoe, had now assumed the offensive, and were laying waste the land. They saw to it that no news of their operations trickled through to the coast.

Don Quentin Sariol had endured with all philosophy their presence outside his shut gates. The capital was in a state of siege, but that did not seem to disturb him. He had harangued the few troops left at his disposal since the President had almost emptied the cavalry and artillery barracks to serve his private ends, and, that done, adopted a patient dignity under difficulties which might have deceived any one who did not know him intimately.

But every citizen of Alta Cruz knew him well, had known him too long to be taken in, and even Challoner, the special correspondent of the New York *Wireless*, who was the only stranger then within the walls, winked cynically after he had sized up the Vice-President's new attitude.

That most assiduous searcher after news of note had taken up his quarters in the city of the golden spires after his ignominious expulsion from the Golden Horseshoe. He had the entrée of the palace wherein he picked up that information which went winging coastwards with the carrier-pigeons he had thoughtfully provided for such purpose, so that Newspaper Row and Fleet Street were far better informed as to what was going on in San Benito than were the bulk of the inhabitants of that benighted country.

The South-American republic was in a state of anarchy, its debts unpaid, its treasury empty, His Excellency, its official head, secluded at or near his summer residence among the mountains, whence the most urgent appeals for his presence had failed to entice him back to his post. His deputy did not dare to assume office in his absence, was waiting the trend of events, would take no action whatever at his own risk. Responsible government there was none; the strongest party at the moment was that of the insurgent Reds.

Such was the situation as set forth under scare head-lines in the *Wireless* on the same morning that its delegate at Alta Cruz went up the palace-steps for the last time. He had heard rumours of an impending consultation between Don Quentin, with such members of the National Assembly as were then in residence within the capital, and the leaders of the revolutionary movement, which¹ assuredly

presaged trouble for some one; whether Ybarra, against whom they were plotting, or themselves, on whom the Tiger might spring from his lair at any moment, no one could yet foresee and they least of all.

The palace was well guarded, but Challoner, duly accredited, made his way unchecked to the great banquet-hall wherein seats had been set for those expected. He was the earliest arrival there and took the opportunity to seek a corner where his presence need not be unnecessarily noticeable. It irked him to be bound by such precautions, but while the *Wireless* paid him for the gathering of foreign intelligence he had to sink all scruples in its service, safeguard himself, its representative, by all means in his power.

A curtained window-seat provided him with the seclusion needed, and there he waited as the room filled—eavesdropping if you will, but from no mean motive and at his own grave risk.

A dozen men in frock-coats and soft hats slipped in, sat down in shamefaced silence until one, a little bolder than his brethren, spoke sibilantly to another, when there broke out a low storm of suspicious whispering. Others appeared till Challoner could count eighteen, and the eighteenth was Quentin Satriol, smiling suavely, hand outstretched to every one.

He took the chair of State, the others closed up towards him, and without further ceremony they commenced their session.

One greybeard got upon his feet, and speaking, by his own statement, for the people, repeated a long list of grievances, asking redress for them of the Vice-President.

"Señor Ybarra has deserted us in our darkest hour," he cried with tragic gesture and concluded.

Following him, the Minister of Finance begged leave to state that he had no finances, and proved the need thereof if he were to hold his portfolio. "We are the laughing-stock of South America," said he with frowning brows, "we, patriots and men of single mind. I call upon you, fellow-countrymen, to free yourself for ever from the impositions which have drained the very dregs, wrung the last copper coin from a treasury once well stocked, of a responsibility none could impugn."

Foreign Affairs added his quota to the general discontent, and his colleague, the Minister of War, spoke wofully of matters military. "It is not meet," he urged, "that, while we suffer here the hardships and privations seemingly inseparable from a siege, the flower of our brave army should be forced afield to aid a private enterprise. I see the body politic without a head, and sick at heart. Let us beware lest it should die before we call in the doctor."

Subdued applause greeted this happy simile and he sat down. A dozen others had remarks to make in a like strain, and Sariol, the slippery, heard them out in silence; and when they looked to him for some response, he merely said, "A deputation from the

misguided men who have besieged this city has asked the honour of an interview with—with us. Shall we receive them here—or send word that we do not treat with rebels?”

His assumption of the impartial outsider tickled Challoner, who knew how carefully all these proceedings had been planned. But the grey beard was once more wagging, and to the Vice-President's discomfiture. “We look to *you* for guidance, Don Quentin,” its owner answered for his fellows. “*You* are responsible, in His Excellency's absence, for the conduct of affairs of State.”

Don Quentin, thus hard pressed, touched the golden bell beside him, and at the signal there was ushered in a group of swarthy, black-browed fighting men, who, in defiance of all etiquette, were fully armed. They clanked across to where, by some strange coincidence, there was standing a row of empty chairs, and nodded cavalierly to the assemblage, which returned their scanty greeting with all ceremony.

“Have you decided anything?” a leader of guerrillas asked and stared from face to face with impatient, bloodshot eyes. “My dogs are straining at the leash. It will be well to act before they break it.”

“What would you have me do?” demanded Sariol, assuming the responsibility his colleagues of the Council had appeared to thrust upon him. “While President Ybarra is in power it is with him that we must reckon.”

"Ybarra has absconded from his post," the spokesman answered. "We look to you, Don Quentin Sariol, to take his place—to remedy the evils he has caused—to save our Fatherland from further strife within its borders.

"If you are man enough to lead, we follow; but—we will not wait. Time presses, and unless that main point can be settled here and now, Alta Cruz will be sacked till nothing but the site is left of it. Speak up, señor! We lack a president in this Republic. Will you take office under oath?"

Sariol sat and pondered, without speaking. Now that his careful schemes had borne the fruit he had hoped to pluck, now that the hour of crisis was at hand, the moment which meant everything, upon him, he felt unusually nervous, ill at ease. The crown of his career had been held out to him, he had been urged, almost implored to take it.

He looked up at the stained-glass dome above him, studied it for an instant, and then shook his head with simple dignity.

"I cannot step into a friend's shoes while that friend is absent," he said in ringing tones, and Challoner, in turn, sought inspiration in the roof-light for this change of front.

The figure of Ygnacio Ybarra was outlined against the glass, his face was peering down upon the gathering below, a sneering smile that showed his teeth between moustache and beard proclaiming that he had at least divined its purpose.

"All I can promise you," said Sariol in a much lower key, but as though he had seen nothing, "is that the shoes in question will be filled without delay. Meantime, you gentlemen who have attended us under safe conduct will do well to get straightway beyond the walls, and at a gallop. I have a telegram——" He fumbled in a pocket and, producing a crumpled sheet, spoke still more softly but with warning emphasis, "I have a telegram to say—to say that the señor Ybarra is at this moment on his way hither from the Golden Horseshoe. As soon as I have consulted with him I—I ——"

He left his seat, and no one needed any second bidding to begone. The insurgent leaders spurred, the National Assembly shuffled off on foot, and scarcely had the echo of their flight died down before Ybarra, with a posse of life-guards at his back, was standing at the doorway looking aggrievedly into the empty room.

Challoner took no chances. He waited where he was, and saw His Excellency enter after the soldiers had departed in obedience to a sign. Then Sariol came in, his eyes fixed meditatively upon the floor, and when he saw the other there, great was his joy.

"My dear Ygnacio!" he cried, coming forward with outstretched arms. "My *dear* Ygnacio! This is a pleasure long looked forward to. The days have dragged since we met last—and much has happened to make me long for your return. When did

you get here? What good news have you? Your wife is well? And you yourself?"

He spoke with a most admirable air of innocent astonishment, and even Ybarra was in some degree imposed upon by it.

"You've had a meeting here," His Excellency said abruptly, and ignoring altogether the other's inquiries.

"The rebels sent a deputation in to treat with us," explained Don Quentin with ingenious veracity. "They have but this minute gone. They are peremptory, Ygnacio. I had to temporise. I told them that you would be here anon: that until then I was without authority to act. They threatened us with consequences, but—since you have come back there will be security of life and property for the loyalists."

Ybarra looked him up and down admiringly, as though half minded to compliment him on his diplomatic explanation of a difficult position, but all he said was, "Will you send word to them that I am here, with tempting terms to offer?"

Whatever disappointment the Vice-President may have experienced at his superior's acceptance of a situation complicated to the last degree, he managed to dissemble it, and took steps to comply with the charge laid on him, sending word to the seething camp without that they must still postpone the execution their mutual plan and in its place take part in further conference.

Whereat the revolutionary leaders cavilled to such purpose that His Excellency had no option but to go with them—since they refused point blank to show sufficient faith in his safe-conduct as regarded coming to him. He went forth fearlessly with a small escort, and unarmed. The common people cheered him for his courage as he passed towards the gates, and Don Quentin, left waiting in the palace, cursed them for their pains. He had to learn yet, what Ybarra knew full well, the fickleness of popular allegiance.

When the insurgents saw the Tiger ride through their lines as calm and unconcerned to outward seeming as if they had been his best friends, they, too, experienced a change of feeling. A single bullet would have rid them of the burden they were there to strike from off their shoulders, but the man's cold daring overawed them once again, as it had often done before. They let him pass unscathed, and he dismounted at the spot set by their chiefs for the conference, and these then gathered about him with grave courtesy, so that the opportunity was lost.

His Excellency's cue in their case was an easy intimacy such as, coming from one of his high station, could not but please them. He told them frankly, if not altogether truthfully, the plans that he had laid for the salvation of their common country by means of an alliance with his wealthy cousin. He multiplied her fortune many times and turned it into local currency for their edification. They gasped

with impotent astonishment at the idea that a mere woman should have sole control of such unbounded wealth. He pointed out to them how they had hampered him, by their ill-advised manœuvres in his attempt to bring the matter to a head; how they had interfered at every turn to his discomfiture and therefore to the advantage of those foreigners who had been bold enough to desecrate the sacred soil of San Benito, bearing weapons. He played upon their childishly perverted patriotism until they were ready to apologise for all their actions, and ended with a plausible appeal for their assistance to undo the evils they themselves had wrought, of course, unwittingly.

When he had finished he drew back a little that they might discuss the case in all its aspects among themselves, and made some further friends among the rank and file grouped in the background. His careless *bonhomie* charmed the cut-throat scoundrels who had swarmed to swell the forces of rebellion; his hints of a congenial opening for their talents, subject only to their leaders' full concurrence, inflamed their curiosity, tantalised them, gave them good cause to wonder whether they were wise to work while there was money to be made at play such as he vaguely outlined.

A murmur of approval followed him as he rejoined the conclave he had left, and his eyes narrowed with an inward merriment over the ease wherewith he was shaping their rude wills towards his own ends.

A provisional capitulation was the present outcome of his talent for intrigue. Where there was money to be made the revolutionists were foster-brothers of the loyalist party. The President might rest assured that they would aid him to the uttermost in his attempt to snatch such a prize as the doña Beatriz Ybarra from the grasp of a greedy alien. Her bounden duty was to marry him, and so enrich her native land. Since she had proven contumelious they would interfere on his behalf.

And that was all he wanted with them.

"The American and the two women with him must be in hiding somewhere between here and the Pass," he said with certainty. "In any case they cannot cross the Summit, which is guarded. If you will scour the country till you capture them I'll send a fresh force to retake the *hacienda*—you have heard, no doubt, that I had too few men for that? Some of you may remember the old stories of the hidden treasure there—of the church plate which disappeared when the heathen tribes sacked the mission as it was then. It was all gold, pure gold, and of incalculable value. I have discovered its strange hiding-place, and, once we have achieved success, all who take part in either expedition will be entitled to an equal share ——"

"*Viva Ybarra!*" shouted a swart mountaineer to whom the oft-told legend of the Golden Horseshoe was as gospel. A dozen more took up the cry, a score, a hundred, every man there. The Tiger

mounted and rode off to be acclaimed again throughout the streets and at the palace-entrance, where he was welcomed back by the Vice-President, who wore a somewhat sickly smile.

Don Quentin Sariol had played one of the highest trumps he held in his hand, but his finesse had not availed against his adversary.

Alta Cruz was astir with excitement and surmise. About the bivouacs beyond its gates there was great bustle and confusion. The factions which, but an hour before, would have flown at each other's throats were fraternising like friends long separated. Ybarra's fresh device had certainly saved a difficult situation, although at the expense of the Vice-President's private plans. That discomfited plotter retired to his own apartment in the palace, there to ponder over his own delicate position, the best way out of it.

And neither of the two principals in the game whose stakes were life and death took any notice of Challoner looking on. That observant student of chance had followed unperceived when the President went forth to interview the insurgents. From them he afterwards learned all that had passed, and he observed on his own behalf the active preparations going forward for the despatch of reinforcements to the force besieging the Golden Horseshoe, of a search-party on Corbyn's trail.

He did not deem it advisable to run the risks attendant on a return to his temporary domicile.

within the city, but made for his motor-bicycle concealed in a safe place at the side of the road to the sea, and departed for La Boca with much chug-chugging. So that Manhattan heard in due course how the President of San Benito had come out of his retirement and once more taken up the reins of misgovernment. And Washington was able to assure all whom it might concern that there would be no immediate need for the fast cruisers which had innocently congregated among the islands to the north of that most turbulent Republic.

CHAPTER XIX

YBARRA'S DOWNFALL

WHEN Allardyce had seen the torn silk envelope of the balloon among the litter of extraordinary odds and ends which lay about the barns wherein Ybarra had been wont to divert himself during his leisure moments with pseudo-scientific playthings, he had been at a loss to know by what means an ascent had been possible where there was no gas to be counted on for inflating it. But he had not failed to realise the possible importance of his find, and his next discovery had solved the difficulty. In the steel cylinders stacked opposite there were dry chemicals which, under heat, would give off vapour volatile enough to render flight quite feasible, although at the gravest risk.

Allardyce had had experience at Aldershot with a balloon corps. He called Corbyn's attention to his find and Corbyn quickly grasped its salient features. They cast their calculations into many points of decimals and Corbyn set the two girls to sew the rents in the silk. When the time came, Allardyce brewed with extreme caution the dangerous ether on which they must depend for lack of safer medium.

Escape by such means was the last and a most desperate resource. But for the sake of the girls escape was imperative. Corbyn would have sent Allardyce with them, but against that the Englishman mutinied flatly. His place was with those for whom there was no escape, Corbyn's with Beatriz. And, since it was so settled, Corbyn set out with a stout heart, putting his trust in Providence and a determination to succeed in spite of every obstacle.

The start was none too auspicious. The weight in the car and beneath it kept them from rising sufficiently in that rare atmosphere. They were too low down to cross with any assurance of safety the guarded ridge towards which they were drifting on a dying wind.

Schweitzer's infernal marksmanship was what he feared most, and how to baffle that without the aid of circumstances he did not know.

The blast of a bugle floated clearly upwards from the enemy's camp and he turned to Beatriz sitting behind him, her eyes on his every movement.

"We'll have to jettison the last ounce of our outfit," he said swiftly. "I can't well drop your cousin here—it would be murder at this height. But all we can throw out must go." One after another he sent overside the almost indispensable provisions he had made for the girls' comfort, and with that the great sphere rose a few feet. At last and most reluctantly he had to rid himself even

of the three rifles and the ammunition on which he had depended for his last stand, should matters reach that stage. And with it all they were still within short range of the guns.

A puff of air set them a-stagger as a shell shrieked past, but Schweitzer had not set his time-fuse as he ought and it burst far beyond them. A second followed and went wide. Corbyn could see men with shovels digging behind the gun-trails to get elevation for the muzzles. Pale-faced but silent, he was leaning with folded arms on the basket-edge, and he did not draw back when a third shot swept closely by, so closely that his hair stirred in its angry breath.

The globe above rocked drunkenly and sank still lower as they approached the ridge, where they were greeted with a wild rifle-fire.

Ybarra, tied fast underfoot, gave vent to an irrepressible yell when a stray bullet chipped white splinters off the canework close to his head. But otherwise he made no protest as to his very unpleasant position, and soon they were immediately over the camp.

The cold, clear moonlight showed the gunners shifting their pieces round, and Corbyn knew that, once they got trajectory to the north, it would be easy for them to achieve their object. The time had come for him to avail himself of his ultimate resource.

"Sit tight," he said over his shoulder. "There

will be an explosion underneath us in a moment. Don't be afraid."

Then, with an inward prayer, he dropped the phial he had been holding to his thumping heart since Allardyce had handed it to him with a whispered caution when they had started, narrowed his eyelids, and clutched very nervously at the guy-rope beside him. If the explosive gas caught light now ——

A curtain of white flame spread suddenly between the car and those on solid earth. The crash that followed was as that of a thunderbolt. The ball of the balloon rebounded over it and it seemed as though the thin silk must surely burst under the pressure ere they shot upwards with a sickening jerk, enveloped in a thin, acrid vapour through which they could hear Ybarra coughing like a consumptive.

Corbyn, breathing through contracted nostrils, jerkily, peered through it all until he saw the full effect of his bomb. And presently he turned once more inwards to assure the trembling pair crouched in a corner of the car that they were out of all immediate danger.

"Schweitzer will worry us no more," he said in tones which shook despite his efforts to speak steadily. But that he had been imperatively forced to employ such means of dispersing the enemy he would have scrupled to do so. The tiny flask had wrought heart-breaking havoc among them, wholesale destruction. Where but a moment before there

had been the gun-pits, alive with men, lay a dark, gaping chasm in which there was no more movement.

The artificial impetus they had acquired carried them to a height whereat there was no fear of further trouble from the survivors further along the ridge, and there an upper current of air caught them, and carried them northwards in the direction of Alta Cruz.

Corbyn looked back at the Golden Horseshoe, black and silver in that light against the mountain-side, and sighed to think of all that might yet happen there before he should be able to return to the rescue of his comrades. And his two charges, overhearing him, tried hard to pluck up heart for his sake.

Both had been very gently nurtured. The scenes of death and desolation they had witnessed could not but have affected them most hurtfully. But both were brave enough to put the past with all its horrors out of their minds and memories for the present.

They were soon chatting quite contentedly, and Corbyn found comfort inexpressible in their calm courage.

He helped them to their feet and they looked out upon a panorama unforgettable: a white world, far away and very lovely, flooded with tender radiance, and only bounded by the cloud-capped bulk behind them, the distant mountain-range between them and the sea. Its heart was the dream-city of the

golden spires, sparkling in the mid-distance like a frost-diamond set with pearls.

"How perfect!" Beatriz said softly, and Corbyn laid a hand on hers. "We've caught a glimpse of Heaven together, sweetheart," he whispered in her ear. She nodded, and her fingers closed on his. Her heaven was with him.

But more material affairs demanded his attention before long. They had not escaped scatheless from the fusillade directed at them as they had crossed the ridge. Gas was escaping somewhere, and, when he clambered clumsily into the netting while the girls closed their eyes in sick fear for his safety, he found that more than one of the nickel-nosed bullets had pierced the cover. These had cut cleanly through, leaving small punctures which it was difficult to locate, but he succeeded in effecting such repairs as stopped the outflow to some extent, and with that had to rest satisfied.

They had descended imperceptibly to a stratum where the atmosphere was almost stagnant, and hung there immobile until the breeze that would bring daybreak began to blow down from the mountains, driving them once more on their way. The moon had set. Only a few faint misty lights showed through the dark from where Alta Cruz lay. It was evident that they would cross the city at an altitude which would preserve them from all fears of interference even in daylight and, though their course was sloping gradually earthwards, Corbyn

hoped that his next step would help them high enough to surmount the final barrier between them and the coast, the heights above La Boca.

As they drew nearer the lights beneath he busied himself with a coil of cordage over the basket-edge, and, when he had laid that to his liking, leaned out to advise the President of his purpose.

"Ybarra!" he called loudly, and from beneath his feet came the unwilling answer, "I'm still here."

"We must part company at this point," said Corbyn pleasantly.

"What are you going to do?" the voice below asked.

"I'm going to drop you at the capital."

A long and pregnant silence, broken defiantly by the bound and helpless prisoner:

"If you expect me to ask mercy, you're mistaken. You think I am at heart a coward, American dog! Drop me. I will not whimper."

Corbyn bit his lip and seemed about to speak again. The imputation was an unpleasant one. But he changed his mind.

He cut the canvas slings which laced his enemy securely into place, slacked off the rope until that dogged evil-doer hung suspended twenty feet below, tugged at the light line with which he had tied the other's wrists behind him.

"Are your hands free?" he shouted sharply, and, since no response was vouchsafed him, satisfied himself on that point with a hasty glance.

With his knife he slashed through the last connecting link between himself and the contrivance tied underneath, and, looking hastily overside, saw a rapidly diminishing black speck shoot like a plummet earthwards through the dim gloom. He drew a sharp breath of relief as it was shut out of sight by a more bulky body.

"Time and no more," he communed with himself, and said aloud. "He's all right, sweetheart. Come here and see the parachute descend."

"Is he quite safe, Phil?" Beatriz asked anxiously, as she looked down, her lover's arm about her.

"Safe as a house," he answered heartily. "There would be much more risk he were a better man."

Thus relieved of so much dead weight, they soared aloft again with renewed buoyancy and an hour later the sun's rays, expanding what gas there was left, helped them to hold the advantage for a time. But up above they entered a colder current from off the snow-line and dropped from that at dangerous velocity.

Do what he would, Corbyn could not devise effectual means to stop the leakage, and it was all too obvious that they must make such landing as they might upon the plain between Alta Cruz and the Pass, where their plight would be worse than unenviable.

It was by no means enviable now, hung up there without food or water, under a scorching sun.

"I think we'd better get to ground," he said with sudden resolution, and released the escape-valve. "We'll have a good chance of hiding at any rate, while, if we stay here too long, they'll be below ready to net us when we do come down."

The shrunken sphere did not require much emptying. He closed the valve again and checked their fall so that they came quite softly to the tree-tops of the forest he had aimed at entering, a dry and sapless-looking wilderness of gnarled tree-trunks roofed with red, rusty leaves.

Through a great crash of breaking branches they reached momentary safety, scrambling breathlessly clear of the plunging car.

Corbyn slit the silk here and there so that the gas remaining might escape, and all they left behind them when they started off on foot was the torn basket and the empty bag of the balloon.

"Until they find that they can't start upon our trail," he said encouragingly, "and it will take some finding in this wilderness.

"Now for a drink of water, eh, Fifi? And then we'll make a move towards the coast."

Fifi smiled wistfully, but did not answer. She had been suffering agonies of thirst; her parched and swollen lips refused to speak for her.

It did not take them long, however, to reach the stream Corbyn had been able to forecast from overhead by studying the foliage. A green glade ran right through the heart of the sere desert, and by the

compass at his belt they made their way in its direction.

Fifi ran forward when she heard the first faint echo of the rivulet to which the forest had owed its being, and, when the others reached her, she was kneeling with wet lips beside a crystal pool, her attitude expressive of the thankfulness she felt.

Corbyn saw then how worn and heavy-eyed she was, and his heart smote him. Beatriz also was showing signs of the strain they had been suffering since they had started.

Food there was none, but surely, he thought, they might rest for a brief hour.

"We'll stay here for a time," he told them, and they threw themselves down wearily without a word. But for himself there was no rest possible.

He took his bearings with exactitude, and left them for a short space that he might climb a bluff above and thence lay the course they must follow. It cost him twenty minutes to climb high enough, and there he spent ten more making a rough sketch-map of the country which stretched between him and the sea-range. It would be very dangerous to stray from the due route.

Then he caught sight of a cloud of dust close to Alta Cruz, and, training his glasses on it, gathered that the pursuit was in full cry already.

He waited only to make sure that they were well enough aware of the balloon's descent to start the search within the forest and then went stumbling

downwards at his best speed, keeping to the high bank above the stream instead of following its bed as he had done on the way up, so that he saw no sign of the two men who were tracing so carefully, step by step, the few faint signs of his ascent.

And when he got back to the spot where he had left the two girls, it was empty.

His heart stood still and his face turned grey through its tan. With frenzied haste he verified the fact that he was not mistaken as to the locality. The leaves that they had lain on still bore the faint impress of their forms. Indentations in the softer soil proclaimed that many other feet than theirs had trod it recently.

He groaned aloud in his agony, not knowing where to turn first. It took him precious time to find which way their kidnappers had come and whither gone. And, while he followed frantically the true trail, he heard the chase so close that he knew it must have discovered the balloon already.

A yell of triumph gave conclusive evidence of that, and he turned back with blazing eyes, a last despairing project in his mind.

He crossed the stream again, ran through the green grove on its banks to where the thicket lay all dry and brown and rotten.

A little pile of dead leaves served his purpose. He put a match to them, and, in an instant, they caught light, blazed up, sent tongues of flame into the tangle fronting them.

Once up-hill and once down did he repeat the process, and when he once more turned back to pursue his own path, there was an almost smokeless screen of fire between him and his enemies—a screen which spread and broadened until those in front of it became aware that the strange roaring they could hear up-wind presaged a forest fire, and got to horse again and fled in fear before it; leaving beyond the green embattlement about the rivulet the man they had come there to seek.

Satisfied that he had thus stopped them for the moment, Corbyn broke back to where the dim foot-prints turned and twisted through the undergrowth and northwards. He lost them frequently, found them again, and struggled on in a hot fury of determination that only death should daunt him in his quest.

He blamed himself most bitterly for the misfortune which had thus befallen, was ready to make restitution to the uttermost.

Thorns and projecting branches tore his uniform, scratching his face and hands till the blood flowed. He tripped and fell and rose again, dusty, dishevelled, sweating at every pore.

His lungs were clogged and heavy, he could scarcely see. And, when a band of men sprang suddenly upon him from both sides, he was in no case to withstand them.

CHAPTER XX

THE BELLS TOLL BACKWARDS

WHILE Meggs and O'Dare and Allardyce stood on the edge of the plateau watching the balloon drift towards the ridge, they suffered even more than did those who were travelling in it through the danger zone.

Dennis O'Dare's heart sank till he felt physically sick at thought of Fifi's peril when the first gun was fired, and not until the flask of picric fell among the enemy did they dare to assume that their friends had the slightest chance of getting through unscathed. But after that, and when they saw the great gas-bag leap upwards unhurt on the atmospheric wave caused by the explosion, their apprehensions gave place to a grave elation, the other two congratulating Allardyce on the forethought which had provided for such eventuality.

"We owed old Schweitzer one," said that youth modestly, "and Corbyn's paid it for us at his own risk. He's safely started now, though, and the sooner we find some way to follow him the better for all of us.

"What we've got to consider first is how to handle

the wounded. But for them we might have made a dash for it behind the bomb."

"With twenty-four hours' rest they will be fit to travel," asserted Meggs. "They're all sound in the legs at any rate."

"They're a great-hearted lot of boys!" said O'Dare emphatically. "Two or three of the worst hit told me they'd stay behind and take their chances rather than keep the others back. But we'll get all that's left safe home, please God."

"We must get out of this at any rate," Allardyce put in. "The well's been bone-dry since the disturbance underground, and the few bucketfuls of water I could save won't last us long even on half-rations. "If we could only land beyond the ridge and pick some horses up ——"

They turned back towards the *hacienda*, there to spend the night cudgelling their brains for some scheme of escape.

The hours passed without active incident, and all next day they watched and waited for the final assault they feared but which did not come: and made such preparation as they might for the sortie they had decided on as the upshot of their discussion.

Such ammunition as was left among them they divided equally. Their scant supplies of food and water were devoted chiefly to the invalids. They laid fires to be lit at dark in order to deceive the enemy. And Allardyce contrived, with weights and cords and torches, an ingenious device by means

of which shots might be fired at intervals for some time after they should have left, from the otherwise unserviceable rifles they had found among the dead two days before.

Towards dusk, however, they became aware of a fresh stir within the distant camp which had lain in such quietude since morning; and, with their glasses, watched the arrival there from Alta Cruz of a field column fit to face an army corps.

"They honour us," said Meggs contemptuously as they saw the last company march in. "We're only nineteen strong, and they seem to have sent half the population of the Republic up to tackle us."

"So much the better for us after we get past them," Allardyce responded cheerfully. But for all his brave words his heart was heavy. What possible chance could nineteen men have against such odds?

"I don't think they'll attack to-night," he added. "Their reinforcements must have had a hardish day of it if they've come from the capital."

"But all the same I think we should slip out in good time. There's no use waiting until they surround us and then trying to escape."

"I'll take a stroll down to the tunnel-mouth and see if all's clear there. Then, if you both agree with me, we'd better start right off, before the moon comes over the mountain."

"I'll go below with you," Meggs said, "and Denny can keep watch till we get back."

They went away together, through the chapel and the crypt, into the long, dark passage, which was strangely warm.

At the pit-mouth they stopped to peer down, and Allardyce uttered a startled exclamation.

"Gad! Jerry," he ejaculated. "There seems to be something wrong here, or else my eyesight's failing. The darkness looks too solid to ——" He bent above the opening and let fall a stone. A little spurt of liquid rose immediately below them and splashed back. A ripple overspread the blackness.

"It's water," Meggs cried, and they looked at each other with startled eyes.

"It must have been Denny's tampering with the arrangements underground," he suggested more slowly. "The well's closed, and the water's rising here.

"And there must be a stream behind it to force it up, Allardyce. What if it's cut the conduit to the reservoir!"

"This must be where the heat is coming from," his friend said in an anxious voice. "We've struck a hot-pipe—and it's going to flood this passage presently. Think of the rate it must be rising at to have filled this great bottle since we were here last.

"Then, when the outlet's choked, it will boil over or burst through into the fire beneath—in which case there will be a bad blow-up somewhere. We'll have to get a move on, Jerry, if we don't want to be scalded!"

They turned back to the chapel without delay and sent out a hurry-call for O'Dare; bade the men there make all speed to the stables, and, as soon as the wondering Dennis had joined them with his sentries, followed without loss of time, leaving the watch-fires burning, their house in order.

Even as they crept round the gallery at the pit-mouth, they could see steam rising from the nearer surface, which bade fair to overflow before they could win clear of the tunnel.

A hasty recount within the empty stables showed that they were all there, however, and they crept away through the darkness in Indian file, Meggs and Allardyce at the head of the hasty procession, O'Dare shepherding the rear.

The leaders bore to the left, where an old maize plantation might afford them cover of some sort among the trampled stalks. They skirted that to its extremity, and cut at a right angle along its base towards the vertical wall of rock which gave the Horseshoe shape.

The jingle of cavalry accoutrements came from afar to their ears, and, with a whisper down the line, they dived back into concealment, lay down, with carbines ready.

A strong patrol went past at a walk and stopped close by. It stayed there for a space, the troopers talking in low tones but loud enough to overhear.

Allardyce gathered from their chance conversation that Corbyn had crossed Alta Cruz, but had been

captured on the other side. And that the rampant Tiger was once more in power. He heard them curse their superiors for the unnecessary watchfulness displayed at this late date; assert with blasphemy that there was no chance of the remaining prisoners within the Horseshoe winning escape; and declare their absolute indifference as to such a detail while there was treasure waiting to be won on the plateau.

A little later they went their way, and the silent watchers withdrew the fingers that had been lying alongside trigger-guards.

The moon rose ere these fugitives had reached the shadow of the encircling precipice, and, as its light swept the great plain before them, they saw for themselves that they had got away in time and no more.

The army of the ridge was crossing it in extended order towards the *hacienda*. The patrol they had passed was part of its half-moon formation. All had been carefully planned for the final, decisive struggle.

With such incentive to spur them on they made good speed.

"Those fellows weren't troopers of the forces," Allardyce whispered breathlessly by the way to Meggs. "The revolution has joined forces with the Government, it seems, at this stage of the game. Ybarra's offered them the treasure in the pit as a prize if they retake the *hacienda*, and I don't think

there will be many left upon the ridge with that loot waiting.

"What do you say if we try the water-gate?"

"That was my idea," Meggs answered, chuckling.

"I hope they have some divers with them this time, Allardyce. And even then they will have difficulty in plumbing the pit."

They reached the reservoir, and found it almost dry, with an open sluice.

"The careless dog!" said Allardyce disgustedly.

"There doesn't seem to be a soldier left among them since Von Rudolf died, poor fellow! And as for discipline—I'll bet the guard's gone off to join the pillagers. Gad! won't they look sick when they find what's waiting them!"

It turned out even as he had predicted. No one denied them entrance to the empty river-bed, down which they scrambled, and at the exit they found but a dying fire in token that the watch which had been stationed there had not been able to resist the temptation to join the treasure-seekers.

They passed the spot where they had left their horses, and which was also empty, swore softly over that loss, and pursued their way on foot until it seemed that they might safely call a halt to ease their labouring lungs. Whereafter they pushed on for a time in proper military order, with scouts and point and rear-guard of able men, the main body invalids.

These last were making valiant efforts to keep pace with their more fortunate fellows, but before

long O'Dare had to send word towards the front that one or two were lagging. Allardyce was at point, and slowed down when the message reached him, but even then the weak and wounded were unable to maintain their places in the line of march.

He halted once more among the shadows until the full force had come up from behind, and held brief consultation with his friends.

It would have been waste of time to resume their flight at the risk of a total break-down. Transport of some sort must be provided for the unfortunate invalids. He had a concrete plan in his head whereby that might be procured. He explained it to them, and, having overborne their united protest against his taking any such suicidal chance, chose two out of the dozen volunteers to accompany him on his dangerous errand.

"If I'm not back in an hour, don't wait for me," he begged of Meggs and O'Dare. "Keep moving coastwards, however slowly, and—good luck to you!"

They wrung his hand, and let him go, since needs must.

He encountered no least sign of pursuit as he and his two assistants tramped back along the dusty, deserted road which led to the ridge. It was evident that the attacking enemy had so far failed to discover the flight of the defence.

As soon as he came within shouting-distance of the cutting through which he must gain ingress to

the camp he left his aggrieved companions in hiding, under strict orders to rejoin the others without a moment's delay in case they should hear him cry that he had been caught, and went on alone, trusting to luck to see him safely through the guard at the entrance.

And as luck would have it there was but a single sentry on duty.

The armistice in force between the rebels and the government had afforded excuse for the relaxation of such assiduous precautions as had been needful previously.

Allardyce, parleying with the man, found time to observe that the guard-tents seemed to be empty. The wonderful magnet hidden away in the heart of the Golden Horseshoe had broken the bonds of discipline even more effectually than he had dared to hope it might.

He explained to the indifferent native that he and certain foot-sore troopers of his command had been left by the wayside for lack of horses, and that he had come on alone to take back mounts for his men.

That plea was sufficiently plausible to excuse his ignorance of the countersign, and his travel-worn uniform stood him in still better stead. He passed on stiffly and entered the camp itself, turning as if by instinct towards the cavalry lines, no one else interfering with him.

There were rows upon rows of horses picketed there, with saddles stacked at their heels. He

picked out eight of the best appearing, clapped their gear on loosely, mounted one, and rode away leading the others.

From here and there a gruff voice called some remark to him as he passed, but he paid no attention to them, holding straight for the roadway that led to the exit, his teeth tightly set, his heart thumping hard to his ribs.

It was all he could do to rein back when the sentry once more cried the challenge, to go on again at a moderate pace when permission to pass was accorded.

"What news of the attack, lieutenant?" inquired the guardian of the gateway, laying an eager, detaining hand on his reins.

"Have they found the treasure? What will my share be worth? Is it right that I shall have something extra for staying here?"

Allardyce pressed cautiously past him, ready to make a dash for it.

"I could not get word with a soul inside," he called back in a gruff voice. "They're every one after the gold. A wise man would make his own share sure."

The soldier drew back, scratched his head, and stood staring after him in a state of most grievous indecision.

A little way down the road a cautious whistle brought his two comrades forth from their hiding-place, and all three were soon galloping for the main

body, Allardyce riding recklessly, a great sensation of relief in his heart. There was only time for a hasty word of congratulation on his almost miraculous success before the wounded were set in the saddle and they resumed the march to the sea.

They had been travelling thus, with an infrequent pause to draw breath, for some hours, had reached the entrance to that deep gorge through which the roadway threaded the foothills, when, without warning, they experienced two sudden and most disconcerting shocks.

The first of these, the meeting with a picket obviously strong enough to overpower them, which at a vigilant outlook's warning, sprang from among the rocks on either side and strung across their path; the second a muffled, subterranean rumbling which set the horses shying wildly, an ominous, dreadful movement of the solid earth beneath their feet.

A chorus of wild cries surged up from the men in front of them.

“*El temblor! El temblor! The earthquake!*” screamed a voice that was scarcely human, and at the dread words those who would have withstood them fled, terror-stricken, from the spot. For there the highway lay between two walls of rock, which were swaying loosely in the cold moonlight as though they must come together and crush in their cruel jaws the puny human beings, the cowed and trembling horses, staggering foolishly where they

had stopped, making no effort to find what safety they might in flight.

The shock passed. "Trot!" shouted Allardyce, his face still haggard with the horror of it, and, clutching a stirrup-leather, struck at the shivering animal beyond it, stumbled forward. The others followed at irregular intervals since it took time to start some of the horses, but all were present when, at a safe distance, he stopped again to see. Then he collapsed, lying down limply by the roadside, letting his head fall forward in the dust. And the riders slipped from their sweating horses, throwing themselves on the ground that they might ease the awful vertigo which was still making their heads swim, rid themselves of a nausea worse than any seasickness.

It took them time to recover their mental and moral capacity, but, as their beasts calmed down, they too regained some measure of self-confidence; and, in a little, went on their way without speaking.

That which had passed had been too awful in its sinister significance for words.

The night and the long road alike seemed never-ending, but dawn found them looking down on Alta Cruz, a city almost unrecognisable.

Its golden spires had suffered cruel eclipse, and from such as had been left standing bells tolling backwards cried to the clouds above its anguish. Black, heavy clouds these, fed by the fires still blazing here and there amid the ruins of the capital.

Even the weary travellers grouped on the brow of the hill above it gazed blankly at each other, dumbly dismayed by disaster so widespread and pitiless.

But they were not allowed long time for reflection, since almost at their heels there poured forth from the foothills a wild flight from the inferno they had left behind in the mountains. They were forced to seek hiding while its forerunners fled past. Troopers of cavalry these, from the camp on the ridge, riding with necks for sale down to the lowlands, anywhere, to get away from those terrible, toppling peaks. Then came the gunners, on heavier horses, spurring, wild-eyed and afraid. For a long hour they streamed out from the foothills in hundreds, while the handful of men concealed on a bank above the roadway rested watchfully. But panic reigned, to the exclusion of all other business, public or private. Personal safety was every one's chief concern. With a mere human enemy it was no time to interfere.

Wherefore, after the last of the mounted fugitives had gone by, those who were waiting were able to go on their own way unnoticed.

They thought it wisest, however, not to take any unnecessary risk, and to that end made a circuit of the city at great pains rather than pass through or near it. The foragers they sent out discovered a deserted *rancho* in a valley by the way, and there found food in the shape of eggs and black bread. With that they broke their fast, and thus were

strengthened to push on, but it was afternoon before they came into the level country lying between the capital and La Boca.

On that side their position was much more dangerous, and, more than once, they saw troops on the move in military order. From which they judged that the worst of the earthquake had been confined to the upper regions, that the plain had not suffered so severely.

On its edge they paused to consult, and made up their minds to remain in cover till nightfall, when they could resume their march to the sea under more propitious auspices. They selected a suitable spot to encamp on, and there bade the wounded men lie down and sleep, while such of those still sound as could be spared from duty took their turn of rest with devout thankfulness.

The hours passed like so many minutes since they were not molested, and, when the time came, they went onwards again uncomplainingly, with drooping heads and aching limbs, but all undaunted.

They had to keep the highroad at the start, as, until the moon showed up, it would have been impossible to make headway across country. The wind was with them, and the dust they raised came after them in a low cloud. But in the dark that did not matter, and they trudged along without regarding it, hope growing in the hearts with every mile they covered.

“We’ve only one more difficulty to negotiate,”

Allardyce said to Meggs in a low tone as they two led the way. "If we can get across the Pass ——"

Two shadows sprang upon him, two upon his friend, a multitude on the men behind. The cocked revolver he was carrying exploded harmlessly as he fought tooth and nail to free himself. No other shot was fired and none was necessary, so complete was the surprise.

He groaned aloud in his great bitterness of heart for that they had been captured after all they had come through and on the very threshold of escape.

CHAPTER XXI

GRIEVOUS NEWS

AFTER Ybarra had despatched part of his motley army, half regular, half revolutionist, to the retaking of the Golden Horseshoe he sent for his deputy, don Quentin Sariol; being imbued with a lately conceived and patriotic impulse to make that gentleman part with a considerable sum of ready money for the replenishment of the national exchequer, with the alternative of being instantly shot on the score of having trafficked treacherously with the forces of rebellion.

But don Quentin was far too old a bird to be caught napping on a limed twig. He had already set out post haste for the seaport of La Boca, leaving a courteous note to explain that, since his senior had once more assumed the cares of office, he would solace himself, after his recent and most harassing responsibilities, with a short sojourn elsewhere.

Whereat His Excellency swore very vehemently, for he had been set in his purpose of squeezing don Quentin to the last onza.

His dangerous descent by means of the parachute had not depressed him. Rather the contrary, for

he felt that a man who could come safely through all he had suffered within the past four and twenty hours was surely marked out for especial eminence. Mere death was not for him. He was inebriated with his own conceit.

He had not overheard from the roof's height where he had surreptitiously ensconced himself to spy on Quentin and his coadjutors, who had thought him still safely occupied at the *hacienda*, what had passed between the members of the meeting underneath, and, after its convener had observed him at his peephole, he had not been able to get down in time to intercept them. The catch of the trap-door through which he had gained the roof had slipped into place while he was still outside and it had cost him precious minutes to summon assistance, to obtain entrance again. But, notwithstanding the Vice-President's plausible explanation, he had felt well assured that there was treason brewing, that he could turn it to account in ready money. For don Quentin had held his present post too long to be a poor man, had saved while Ybarra had squandered, and that without affording his superior any pretext to extract a loan, compulsory or voluntary.

All of which irked His Excellency so sorely that he swore.

Then he called for a horse, and orderlies, riding forth like a man possessed on the trail of the force he had sent to surround the balloon. The common people stopped to gape at him as he passed through

the streets, his great black charger striking fire from every flinty cobble, he sitting it like a centaur, his lancers on their speedy ponies many lengths in the rear.

"The devil himself surely sits at the Tiger's crupper," grumbled a crone he had all but trampled under foot in his mad passage, and the mob laughed. They loved a loose rein and a steady seat, a reckless rider.

Word had already reached him that the American had come to earth within the charcoal-burners, forest, a dozen miles beyond the city-gates. His brown face burned beneath the blazing sun as he sped onwards, and, when he reached the spot where-at the hunt had left the roadway to break through to the balloon, he sent the spurs home, shooting past it without hesitation, a fresh purpose already formed.

He knew that Corbyn must seek some outlet from the woods, and meant to head him off thereat, to take him prisoner single-handed, and thus revenge condignly all the humiliations he had suffered in his cousin's sight. She must be brought to see that he could stay the longest course, and come out winner; and—if his enemy should prove recalcitrant the pair behind him had their carbines. The credit of the capture—or the killing—should be his. His brainless friends within the covert would serve as beaters.

League after league he laid behind him and at length turned to the left along a country-road skirting the forest base. Striking a lower reach of the same

stream the fugitives had stopped at, he halted there until his escort scurried up.

He bade them tie the dripping horses to a tree and lead the way up-stream.

They started in, he at their heels, and clambered noiselessly along the open channel, pausing at intervals to cock their ears and listen, but heard no sound until too late.

Six very able-bodied men dropped on them from above in a steep gully they were threading, choking them to such purpose in the sand and gravel there that they could not cry out. And, when they were jerked very rudely to their feet, they had thick gags to bite on, and were thus compelled to silence.

Steel handcuffs held their wrists together at their backs, and, in this plight they were pulled up the bank, pushed into the presence of a gathering which filled His Excellency's active mind with apprehension.

It was composed of men in peasants' garb, lean, sun-tanned men who laughed within themselves at sight of him: all armed with well-oiled rifles of the pattern he had once hoped to supply his army with, and hung about with well-filled bandoliers of lightest webbing.

His heart sank though his eyes were glaring, as he gathered these details before he was tripped up and thrown behind a bush without regard to his high rank in the Republic. He made a mental memorandum to have his two scouts assassinated at an early date if he himself should survive so long, and

lifted his head high enough to look across the roots before him. Fresh footsteps were approaching, hurried, stumbling footsteps coming down-hill at a mad speed.

His captors had laid ambush for whoever that was also. Ybarra could have chuckled as he caught sight of Corbyn's blood-stained, anxious face, but that at the moment a girl's voice cried "Phil!" most gladly, and he knew then that Beatriz as well had fallen prisoner to the band.

Corbyn fought desperately for his freedom, and, at that word, he gained it, for the four men who had sprung upon him fell back simultaneously and the girl's voice cried, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot, Phil!"

He held his hand, unwillingly, and Beatriz ran forward, clasping his arms in hers so that he stood there powerless. And after her emerged from the thick growth about the waterside a stout and jovial-looking labourer who stuck a monocle into one eye, and said, "The dooce! old fellow. Howd'ye do, eh?"

Corbyn eyed him in wordless wonder for a moment and then said limply, "Landguard!"

At which remark the labourer grinned sheepishly. "I *do* look rather rakish in this rig-out, don't I, old chap, eh, what?" said he.

"God! but I'm glad to see you here," Corbyn assured him in a hoarse, shaky voice. "I was afraid—I thought that — Why did you leave me, Beatriz?"

She saw how he had suffered and made answer swiftly:

"Lord Landguard found us, and bade us come with him. He said the troops were close at hand, and that he would send you word."

"And so they were," his lordship corroborated. "I sent two men to fetch you after us, old fellow. Didn't you meet 'em up above?"

"I thought it would be too dangerous to keep the women waiting there while ——"

"You were quite right," Corbyn said, still breathing heavily, "but I missed your men. I stopped to fire the underwood—we had better move out without delay—they'll ride round to this side, and ——"

His lordship drew a silver whistle from a pocket in his ragged coat and at its sound there came towards them the main body of his command, some twoscore stalwart riflemen—all attired like himself. Fifi came out of concealment also, and, from behind a sapless tree-trunk, stepped Challoner the correspondent, who found time to wring Corbyn's hand delightedly ere they once more started down-stream at a pace only limited by the girls' powers.

"The *Wireless* doesn't need me any longer in San Benito," he explained. "They've sent a substitute to take my place. I'm on my way to Russia now. That's how I happened to take a hand in this deal."

"If I had been working for the paper, of course I'd have had to stand out."

"You're rottin', Quiff," his lordship interrupted.

"He's been my guidin' star all through, Phil, old chap, *Wireless* or no *Wireless*.

"Dolly an' I were cruisin' about the Islands, when we got word from him that you were cookin' in a pot o' trouble—somewhere up country.

"An' what to do after we'd landed I did not know, damned if I did—your pardon, Miss Ybarra; my tongue's always slippin'—until he tipped me one or two wily wrinkles of his own, dressed me an' the men up in these dam—ahem! these—these rags, smuggled us across that da—that—that Pass, and then went puffin' off on his infernal—yes, I'll stick to that one—his infernal machine.

"He found us flounderin' about this da—this—the surroundin' scenery this forenoon, an' led the way to where we found you.

"I wonder who those three were that we bagged just before you came into view?"

"One was Ybarra, the President of San Benito," Challoner said quietly, "and the other two his orderlies."

"Where are they?" asked Corbyn as soon as he had gotten over his surprise at the announcement.

"Comin' along behind," Lord Landguard answered nonchalantly. "They're all right, old chap. Don't you fret."

Debouching from the forest they found the three horses tied there and quite safe from any danger of the blaze which had come licking after them along the other bank. The stream would save that portion

they had travelled through, and Corbyn felt no remorse for the destruction of the belt of dead wood between them and the city.

"We'd better leave the animals where they are," he said. "When his followers find them they'll be at a loss to know whether the President's alive or dead."

"Pass the word to inquire whether the two men who went after Mr. Corbyn have yet reported," Lord Landguard ordered, and the message went up the long line till word came back that they had just come in touch with the rear-guard.

"Then we'll get back to our base," said his lordship briskly to the officer behind him. "Wait here and tell each man that passes that we must scatter widely and cross country under cover. They are to pick their steps over the hardest ground and leave no spoor. Rally on that low kopje—yes, the one to westward of the Pass—and watch for signals by the way. See that the horses are securely fastened. Come on behind after you've counted every man out."

The other saluted, with incongruous effect in the disguise of the slovenly costume he was wearing, and Corbyn led Beatriz along the border of a tobacco-field, while Landguard undertook to pilot Fifi. It would have been unwise to follow the stream further and so lay a trail which would be obvious to every tyro in the hunt.

The men, emerging after them, broke right and

left, travelling stealthily, and they went onwards in a V-shaped wedge, with Landguard, in command, as apex, the prisoners with their guards inside but separated.

They had scarcely covered a short mile, when, looking backwards, they saw the pursuit stream past that angle of the forest which had hidden them. Landguard lay down behind an ant-heap and trained his Zeiss glasses on the mob of horsemen.

"I thought at first that they were comin' after us," he said to Fifi, "but they've turned along the slope. The fire has crept as far's the road already—it will soon burn out. We'll dig along again, Miss Florian; I'm hankerin' to get back to papa."

He grinned most genially, and Fifi for all her fatigue could not but laugh both with and at him.

Another half-hour of laborious progress brought them very near their objective, and there a disconcerting incident occurred.

An elderly gentleman, pink-faced and white of whisker, jumped from behind a boulder as they skirted it, levelling at them the rifle he had hold of.

Fifi suppressed with difficulty the cry upon her lips as her attendant cavalier stopped short and looked most quizzically at this strange enemy.

"Now, Pops," he said in a reproving voice, "this ain't the time of year for shootin' son-in-laws! Better be careful or you'll end up by blowin' a bullet into somebody.

"This is my father-in-law, Mr. Corbyn, Miss Florian."

The stranger bowed, and blushed. "My eyes are failing me," he said. "I've been on the lookout for you for the last hour. Where are the others? What news is there, Dick?"

"Great news, Pops. We've got the two ladies safe, and we've bagged Ybarra, and ——"

"Where's Phil?" demanded the older man, unable to restrain his gnawing anxiety.

His lordship halted, and at a blast from his silver whistle a dozen heads popped up in the neighbourhood, all looking in his direction.

"Where's Phil?" said he, and pointed to two of the nearest. "That looks pretty like Phil Corbyn, doesn't it, Pops?"

He grinned delightedly again at Fifi as his father-in-law hurried off at a great pace.

"Poor old Pops!" said he, and they went on together, the others following.

Corbyn stopped in astonishment at sight of the elderly gentleman bearing down on him with outstretched hand. He had thought that his sister and Landguard had been alone on their yacht, that his father was at his office in San Francisco, and the surprise that his brother-in-law had planned for him almost took his breath away.

"Dad!" he said jerkily.

"Phil!" cried his father, and they clasped hands. There were no more words needed to effect full and

complete reconciliation. Neither was given to unnecessary speech. Each knew the other too well to ask any further assurance that the feud which had sundered them for so long was dead and buried, forgiven, forgotten on both sides. Corbyn was overjoyed that it should be so, the older man dumbly thankful that it was not yet too late to retrieve the grievous mistakes of the past. He had dealt very harshly with his only son. He must find some means to make that up to him now.

He turned to Beatriz, on Corbyn's arm, and she flushed rosily. Was ever maiden fated to meet critical inspection in less fit garb! What would he think of her, for whom his son had sacrificed so much?

Could she have known it, he was thinking that, had he been in Phil's place, he could not have done differently. And wishing that the boy's dead mother could but have set eyes on the two of them as they stood there before him: one fair and sweet beyond all telling, with downcast eyes which yet, when they had first met his, had told him everything that he desired to know; the other tanned and haggard after the hardships he had undergone for her sake, but very straight and upright, looking him squarely in the face as he would the whole world, a son whom any father might have been proud of.

"Dad," said that dutiful young man, one arm protectingly about the shrinking girl, "Dad, this is Beatriz."

His tone told all there was to tell, and Mr. Corbyn chuckled delightedly to think of the good news he had brought them both. But that would keep, and meantime he stood upon no ceremony. And the shy glance of gratitude she gave him ere they went on again together in haste to rejoin the others completed her conquest. From that time forward he next to his bold son was her staunchest ally. She had perforce to avail herself of the arm each offered her, and it was thus that they came into camp, greatly to the satisfaction of Fifi and Landguard, who had both been somewhat anxious as to the outcome of their encounter.

"Dick," cried the old gentleman with vast contentment as they drew near, "I'm indebted to you, my boy, for a daughter as well as a son."

"I thought you would be, Pops," said his son-in-law sapiently, and changed the conversation without delay.

"You've fixed us up a famous fort here," he observed as they all passed round the base of a rough hillock only to be ascended from behind.

"It should be possible to hold it against great odds," said Mr. Corbyn modestly. He had been left there on the pretext that he must hold the base for them while the main body made its wild dash into the forest, and Landguard had suggested that he should occupy the height they were now ascending. Six men, two mules, and a machine-gun formed his garrison, and with that force he had effected great

things. Loose stones had been banked up to afford cover, sites sorted for the gun, shelter built for the mules. The place was not, of course, impregnable, but, fortified thus, would not be taken easily.

"Hope we shan't have to test the theory," Landguard replied laughingly. "So far we haven't had to fire a shot, and the less gunnin' we get mixed up in the better for me when I have to get on to my hind-legs in the House of Lords an' tell 'em how it happened that I came to be invading a friendly country with an armed force at my back. It might be a hangin' matter for me, Pops."

At which misstatement his father-in-law merely smiled. He knew that Richard, Lord Landguard, was given to speaking figuratively, and at that moment the rest of the fighting-force marched in, their prisoners with them.

A council of war was held as soon as Landguard had seen the men settled and dispositions had been made for the defence of their stronghold in case of attack. Corbyn repeated what he had already told each in part about the plight of his comrades at the *hacienda*, and it was settled that they must stake what they had so far won on the rescue of the survivors at the Golden Horseshoe, holding Ybarra hostage for the girls' safety. It was no moment for half-measures. Time pressed and come what might they could not desert Meggs and his men.

The President was therefore brought forward, and their intention explained to him, but he made no

comment on it, contenting himself with staring fixedly at Beatriz, seated with Fifi under the shade of a rock near-by. And, since nothing was to be got out of him, they sent him back to his own place, with a last warning that his life would be held forfeit if any harm befell her now.

Then there arose the question whether they should all go south again together or leave a force in concealment there to care for the women, and take a flying column through to the mountains.

But that was unexpectedly solved for them by the appearance from among the hills behind of a great force in groups innumerable. Which strayed past their hiding-place and across the plain towards Alta Cruz, finally forming camp on the open plain, always in separate parties and directly across their path.

"Those are guerrillas from the coastal range," said Challoner. "They must be concentrating there either to assist in besieging the city or because word has reached them that the Reds and regulars are to share the treasure at the *hacienda*. I'm half afraid they'll stay where they are till something turns up. They're too suspicious of the Tiger's strategy to trust themselves much nearer his headquarters."

His fears were not without foundation, for at nightfall there were leagues of country covered by scattered campfires, and a ceaseless interchange of visits between the bands seemed to be going on. No more effectual barrier could have been raised

between the fretting rescue-party and their friends in the country beyond the capital.

All next day it endured, and, when darkness came down, the lights showed that there was nothing for it but to draw further on a stock of patience that was waning fast.

"If they're still there to-morrow," said Landguard, "we'll have to supply ourselves with horses from their picket-lines and make a dash for it."

It would have been sheer madness to attempt that, but nevertheless they turned the project over in their minds with relish, and might indeed have attempted it but for the earthquake which presently woke the world up like a wild nightmare.

There in the open they did not suffer so severely as those who were penned in among the mountains, but, notwithstanding, the cold terror of it gripped hard at their hearts.

Even Ybarra, fearless beyond all standards among men, cried on the gods he had so long contemned as he lay bound among his guards and felt the solid rock shake underneath him, while tortured voices groaned and growled in the great travail of the under-earth.

The shock passed, and, in time, the sun once more shone down on them. They saw a greater multitude than ever on the plain, and a black cloud above the city of the golden spires whose brilliance had departed.

Then there came flying thence towards the sea

fugitives, civilian, military, men and women, a little later the most cowardly of the deserters from the siege of the Golden Horseshoe.

Landguard, on the alert and desperately anxious now, sent a detachment out to capture any straggling soldier whose appearance might warrant the belief that he had come from up-country. That brought back a white-faced linesman who had stolen a comrade's mount from the cavalry-lines on the ridge and fled so fast and far that he had lamed the animal irremediably.

And from him they learned all he could tell concerning the happenings at the *hacienda*, Challoner translating his disjointed sentences into smooth English.

"The attack was timed for moon-rise," he began, "and, as there was no longer need to guard the ridge against the rebels also, all of us save the main-guard had permission to take part in it.

"And we went willingly—to share the treasure.

"Those up above had blown a great gap in the eastern stairway but we had hopes of bridging that, and there was also a plan laid to clear the tunnel. I thought the latter the more likely to succeed and went with that half of our force. But at the entrance there was water flowing, water almost too hot to touch.

"Some of the sappers were thrust forward to investigate and driven up by bullets from behind.

But that was useless, for the flood rose far too swiftly, and always hotter. Those that the bullets spared died in the steam that spat out suddenly in a terrific blast.

"We fell back, for the tunnel-mouth was like a kettle spout, and I went round to see how those at the stairfoot were faring.

"A shot or two was fired from overhead and we judged that the enemy was well aware of our purpose, but we worked away with lines and ladders until ——"

The man's voice shook. He shivered.

"I heard a tearing sound that hurt my ears and then a dull explosion.

"We turned and ran, all of us that were left—the cliff had come down headlong. The Golden Horseshoe was lit up like hell itself. The plateau upon which had stood the *hacienda* was a vomiting volcano, topped by a dense white cloud.

"I was among the first to reach the ridge and so secured a horse. Half way between there and Alta Cruz death clutched at me again in a most dreadful earthquake, but I—I am here.

"How many may have perished at the siege I know not, but for the defenders there was no hope—no, not one: for men who have passed me by the way say that the Golden Horseshoe is becoming a great lake."

He ceased, and those about him sat with heads bent, sorrowing, as he was led away and placed

among the other prisoners. No one had any word to say.

But, while the dead had rest, those who were left must struggle on, and, after a long time, Lord Land-guard spoke:

“We must make for the coast to-night,” he remarked quietly. “I’ll come back afterwards, and——”

“We’ll go up-country together, Dick,” said Corbyn as he hesitated, “after we’ve got the others safely on board your boat.” His voice was not very steady, but he showed no other sign of all that he had suffered in that dark hour.

They broke camp at a late hour to allow time for the road to clear before they should attempt the Pass, which Challoner advised them to negotiate just before dawn, and started with heavy hearts on their long march.

And all went well till the rear-guard sent forward word that an armed force had debouched from among the hills on their trail and was following fast.

CHAPTER XXII

AU REVOIR

"THAT's deuced awkward!" grumbled Lord Land-guard. "What are we goin' to do about it, eh? If we get shootin' at them we'll soon have the whole wasps' nest about our ears."

"If there are not too many, hold them up," Challoner counselled. "Ambush them. Smash their rifles. Turn right about, towards Alta Cruz, and then kick; kick hard."

"We can't afford to have them chase us up the slope, nor can we let them get ahead of us and so take news of our coming to the camp on the Summit."

Corbyn nodded concurrence, and they three fell back on the rear-guard to see the scheme carried out, whispering curt instructions to those in subordinate command of the dim figures swinging past them.

The column was moving swiftly, the two girls travelling on the mules that had formerly carried the machine-gun, which cherished piece of ordnance now lay deeply buried among the rocks behind their vacated entrenchments.

The rear-guard, thus strengthened, was told off in

pairs, and, as soon as they came to a suitable spot, took position, crouching down in the darkness, a double line of men with their rifles slung.

They had not long to wait ere their pursuers appeared, trudging stolidly into the trap, all unwitting of that which lay lurking in wait on either side of the dust-cloud enveloping them.

The jaws of the trap snapped together at both ends simultaneously. A single revolver shot, an insignificant crack like that of a whip, was audible above the shuffling of feet, the panting breaths of those who were struggling at odds.

"Break back, lads! Break back and escape!" cried a desperate voice from in front, and was answered by one shouting wildly, "Stand fast! We're friends."

Captors and captured relaxed their tense grips for an instant while Corbyn asked in a tremulous tone of the shadow whose cry had come in time and no more to prevent further mischief, "Who—who are you?"

"Is that you, Corbyn, old chap?" it answered, shakily also and almost in unbelief. "I—I'm Allardyce."

Words fail to paint the rapture of the reunion which took place there in the starless night. Ten minutes passed and ten more ere they had got half through their mutual congratulations and explanations. But at last Landguard gave the command, "Quick march," and the girls sought their saddles

again, while, as they moved on, Beatriz found Corbyn at her bridle. Dennis O'Dare had replaced the seaman who had been leading Fifi's mount.

There was but one more barrier between the united expeditions and the successful end of their enterprise. It was sufficiently formidable to give them pause, but, if their luck held, they might overcome it as they had its forerunners, while, if it came to fighting, they must take such chances as might befall. But even Ybarra, shuffling unwillingly along between his guards, felt curious to know how they intended to get past the garrison which held the Pass.

They halted half a mile below the Summit, where a most marvellous metamorphosis took place, all the less understandable since it was still dark.

Some fifty very slovenly insurgents pulled out clasp-knives, slit their soiled outer clothing carefully from head to heel, and, through that chrysalis, emerged in the familiar form of British bluejackets. Landguard, their leader, and the officers of his command were also in full uniform of blue and brass and gold.

Corbyn and his worn men felt shabby and forlorn beside them, but there was yet a part for them to play in character when the time came. Challoner was stage-manager of that performance also, and, all his orders having been complied with, they went on till a picket challenged their advance.

Then Landguard, in the lead, called, with as-

sumed anger in his voice, for Corbyn, who hastened forward with a rough native imprecation.

"What's this?" he shouted sternly and glared at the shivering sentry. "Cannot you see, fool, that these are foreigners? Are you a raw recruit that you don't know the difference between their uniform and ours? Have you not heard the order that the legation guards are to pass unquestioned?"

"Forward, señores! Let me apologise for the stupidity of this black animal."

He made a ferocious lunge at the alarmed linesman, who did not dare to protest, lest worse should befall him at the hands of his superior, and Corbyn stayed beside him, breathing dire wrath, while the stalwart English sailors tramped stolidly past, rifles at the slope.

After them came a footsore detachment of native troops, hustling along a huddled party of prisoners in the shape of Beatriz and Ygnacio Ybarra, Fifi and Challoner, the elder Corbyn, the President's two orderlies, and the man who had fled from the siege of the Golden Horseshoe, followed by a few wounded men on horseback.

When they had all gone by, Corbyn, with a parting threat to the sentry, went on again to browbeat any one else rash enough to interfere. But no one did so.

News of the earthquake, the destruction of Alta Cruz and the Golden Horseshoe, the consequent extinction of the filibusters who had held the Presi-

dent's *hacienda* against its rightful owner, the Tiger's own tragic fate in the forest fire, had already reached the Summit through the fugitives who had ever since been trooping across the Pass.

There was nothing at all unusual in the aspect of the prisoners, with bandaged heads, bound hands, or of their escort, ragged, dirty, and slouching of gait, a very indifferent contrast to the smart foreign squad in front. The garrison main-guard, standing round their fire among the trees above the roadway, were satisfied that all was well, since the picket had led the travellers pass. They looked on with dull, sleepy eyes till the last of them was out of sight.

The outpost on the seaward slope did not think it worth while to halt them since they had passed the main-guard, and Ybarra, plodding down hill with sealed lips, his heels in constant contact with the boots of those immediately behind him, ground his teeth in bitter impotent anger as he added one more mental note to the long list in his retentive memory. If he should live it would be his particular ambition to teach the Tenth of the Line the duties of a picket at a point of such importance. He did not know that they were already congratulating themselves on his supposititious demise.

A search-light from the bay below laid a long, thin, white finger on the base of the black mountain-side which the relieved adventurers were now descending, and at Landguard's behest three fires were lit in answer and left ablaze. So that when, after day

broke and the sun was high, they reached sea-level and turned westward away from the road which led into La Boca, there were boats waiting at a safe place to carry them on board his lordship's yacht, a great grey vessel like a man-of-war, lying at anchor opposite the town.

Dorothy, Lady Landguard, was at the gangway to receive them, and had her hands full with the the wayworn party her bold husband had brought back at such risk to himself and her. Her eyes were wet with happy tears as she bade each one welcome, from her husband, father, brother, down to the most bashful of the brave men who had helped them to succour her two sister-women. And then she led Beatriz and Fifi below, and they cried on each other's shoulder over the tale there was to be told.

Ygnacio Ybarra and his followers were bestowed in a place of security and left there under observation, the wounded all established in the sick-bay, where the ship's surgeon soon found means to improve their somewhat sorry plight, and the remainder of the invading army devoted themselves with great glee to improving their appearances in anticipation of the wedding to be celebrated forthwith. It had been announced that there was a couple on board about to enter the honourable estate of matrimony, and in their welfare officers and men alike seemed to take an interest extraordinarily keen.

Landguard had his gig piped away as soon as he had made himself presentable and was rowed over to a smart cruiser flying the Stars and Stripes which had just steamed in. Challoner had not come off from the shore with the others, his professional instincts having proved too strong to let him rest till he should have found out what news there was in La Boca. During their absence the ship was dressed in honour of the occasion, and a brave show she made with all her bunting abroad.

Beatriz came on deck first, in simple travelling dress, and found Mr. Corbyn vastly busy in a cabin there. The desk at which he was sitting was littered with slips of paper, to each of which he was signing his name hastily but with method. He rose as she stepped over the threshold and his face lit up at sight of her. She was so dainty and demure, so very womanly withal in her new guise. He had no words to welcome this bewitchingly beautiful princess who had replaced the shy boy he had found such a snug place in his heart for, but he held out his arms to her and she ran to him with a silken rustle.

Corbyn encountered Meggs at the companion-foot, and "Phil," said his friend, "we owe Barr of Mobile a good turn after all!"

"That doesn't worry me so much as what I owe you, Jerry," Corbyn replied. "But for you, Beatriz and I——"

"I'll tell you how you can wipe that score off,"

Meggs interrupted. "Let me be best man at your wedding."

His honest eyes met Corbyn's straightly. There was no bitterness in them, and the old blind regret lay buried at the mountain-foot where he had fought and overcome temptation. Corbyn made no reply, since none was needed, but put an arm through his, and in that wise they went out into the sunshine together.

"Writing a book about it, Dad?" Corbyn asked from the door of the deck-cabin, wherein he had caught sight of Beatriz. His father looked round, laughing.

"Wedding-cards," he rejoined. "There's one for yourself, Phil, and I want you to distribute the others among your men. Take Beatriz with you—she's got something to tell you, I think—and see that no one's overlooked. Come back for more if there aren't enough.

"And, Phil, if Dennis O'Dare's on deck ask him to look in here, will you."

"Denny," cried Corbyn, catching sight of that individual at the moment, and left him to interview the old gentleman while he went forward with Beatriz to distribute the checks with which he had been entrusted. Beatriz chided him for that he had pocketed his own without any acknowledgment, but he found means to silence her when he thought no one could oversee them and looked down into her laughing eyes with a masterful smile.

"It's all right, sweetheart," he reassured her. "Dad understands, and you don't know the Corbyn ways yet. We don't deal much in flowers of speech."

"Perhaps that's why he's deputed me to tell you about your picture."

"What picture?" he demanded with sudden, eager interest, and halted her in a nook at the back of the chart-house.

She smiled provokingly up at him and he caught her to him again.

"What picture?" he asked imperiously.

"Some pretty girl you must have been seeing far too much of while I was away," she replied, and her eyes were accusing now, "since you were able to send her portrait to the Academy. She's made your fame and fortune, Phil, and I—I'm jealous of her. Your father says that she's *the* feature of the exhibition. Every one's talking about you—and her. Your reputation's made, and—I do think, Phil, that you might have asked me to sit for my portrait instead of her!"

Corbyn was almost overcome by the gladness of her good tidings. Out of dire failure had come achievement, so much the more welcome thus. He had accomplished all he had set out to do, and the fulfilment of his ambition was doubly sweet after the dark and dreary days it had cost him. Success in his chosen profession meant independence, and for that he had intended to go on fighting until he should

win it. His tanned face flushed with pleasure to think that it was already won.

"Dear," said he very tenderly, "I had no model from which to draw inspiration. I pictured my good angel from memory, and—she's captivated all the critics for me. Whatever of fame or fortune may be in store for us, we owe to the girl who looks at you out of your own mirror."

Fifi and Allardyce were the last of the rehabilitated to appear, and on the former O'Dare descended beaming from the deck-cabin, as Challoner came clambering up the ship's side from a shore-boat, with the sad news of San Francisco's terrible fate still ringing in his ears. That he told Mr. Corbyn privately, deeming it only right that he should know at once, and they two kept to themselves for the time being the knowledge of the ruin wrought there by the selfsame earthquake which had spared them.

"But I must get back as soon as possible and see what I can do to help," said the old gentleman. "It's purely providential, Mr. Challoner, that I was not there when it happened. I had intended to remain until I had wound up the last threads of my business, but Doll induced me to leave them and come away. My loss will be but light, and—my life has been mercifully preserved. I have much to be thankful for at present."

"A very sensible young man that," he added to himself, as the unconscious correspondent stepped

out on deck again and joined the group at the ship's rail whence they were watching Landguard's gig start from the cruiser's side.

They welcomed Challoner so warmly that he had almost blushed, a weakness of which he had not been guilty within the memory of man, but he diverted their attention from himself by producing a tiny parcel which he handed to the prospective bridegroom.

"You'll find that useful presently," he remarked with great gravity, and, while the others gathered round, Corbyn brought to light a rough gold ring.

"Sorry the workmanship's so crude," said Challoner, "but it was the best I could get done in the time I had. And I thought you'd maybe like it for luck. The metal it's made of came from the President's golden horseshoe. I found it on the near-fore of his black stallion as we left the forest, and got one of the men to file a stud off for me. The good folk here believe that until it wears out he'll sit secure in his saddle, and he seems to share their belief, for he keeps it in good repair.

"Here's Landguard. Who's he got with him?"

"The cruiser's chaplain," said Allardyce. "We'd better get to quarters. Where's Denny? Tell Mr. Corbyn, Quiff."

The little gathering broke up swiftly, to meet again a few moments later in the long saloon, which Lady Landguard had transformed, by what means she alone knew, into a bower of brilliant tropical blos-

soms. They could hear the boatswain's pipe as he bade all hands lay aft, and presently the whole ship's company trooped in. The chaplain took his place. Corbyn stepped forward, a little nervously, in front of the draped flags, Meggs supporting him as it had been arranged between them. Ybarra was brought in between his guards that he might witness the ceremony and profit by its significance. And then the bride came up the aisle on Lord Landguard's arm, Fifi attending her.

On either side, bare-headed, bronzed, erect and soldierly in their worn uniforms, stood the men who had suffered so sorely in her defence, as gallant a guard of honour as ever graced any wedding. They would have spent their lives for her as uncomplainingly as had the comrades whom they had left behind in the mountains. Without them it would have gone very ill with Beatriz, and she found time to remember that as she passed between the two motionless ranks.

A breathless stillness pervaded the sunlit saloon during the simple service. The chaplain's tones sounded strangely impressive. Corbyn made his responses in a clear voice, and even the bride's somewhat tremulous whisper was audible everywhere. She had been dreading that her unscrupulous cousin might see fit to allege some unjust cause or impediment against her marriage, but the Tiger looked on speechless, in ominous quietude.

"Whom God hath joined let no man sunder,"

said the naval chaplain solemnly, and in another moment the service was over.

"By files from the right," said McGuire, the sergeant, at the head of his men, and marched forward.

"Captain Corbyn, sor," said he, very huskily, though he strove to speak without emotion, "me an' the bhoys here would wish to shake hands, an'—an' good luck to ye, sor. We'd do it all over again without thinkin' twice, for you—an' for her."

Corbyn wrung his hand.

"McGuire," he replied, "I can't thank you in words, but my wife and I will be in your debt all our lives. If we can ever repay any part of what we owe each one of you, you'll find means to let us know. We ask that as a last favour of you."

Beatriz took his rough hand into both of hers, and, "Sergeant McGuire," said she, "you won't ever hurt us by forgetting that, will you?"

"There's no mother's son of us will forget you, Miss—ma'am," answered Sergeant McGuire.

A coast-liner called at La Boca that afternoon, and carried off a husband and wife bound for the Islands which the mail-steamers connect with all the ends of the earth. The other passengers were much interested in them, for they were a very handsome couple, but they seemed to prefer the less frequented parts of the ship. When she left port and the great grey yacht in the bay dipped her ensign as if in farewell, they were leaning over the taffrail

looking their last at the frowning mountain-face which had so lately been to them as a prison-wall. And their hearts were very full as they saw the far flag flutter down and up. So that they had nothing to say to each other just then, but were well content to stand there side by side, hand in hand, until the frowning mountain-face grew golden in the dim distance.

Those on board the yacht watched the steamer sink out of sight with a feeling resembling relief. Meggs gave voice to the general sentiment.

"We've spiked the Tiger's guns for good this time," he remarked to Allardyce. "They'll be safely away from the Islands before Landguard lets him loose again.

"What's our next move to be? I could do with a little healthy excitement of some sort. I can't stand too much monotony, and—that's what's the matter with me."

"You sit tight, Jerry," Challoner recommended. "We'll all be back in Manhattan immediately—Landguard's going to take the whole outfit north—and we'll get you a prescription there that'll quieten you down. You're too rambunctious, my son. That's what's the matter with you."

"How would a week or two in London suit your complaint?" inquired Allardyce. "I haven't seen Piccadilly for close on two years. Quiff's bound for St. Petersburg. What are your plans, Denny?"

"I meant to tell you before, but you've all been so

busy talking," returned O'Dare. "I'm going to get married, and settle down. I'm going to give up chasing trouble for the sake of finding out what it looks like. And I'd advise you all——"

Allardyce cut him short by clapping him lustily over the shoulders, and "Denny," said he, "you've done well, old chap. I know you'll be happy with her. If you don't ask me to your wedding I'll never forgive you. When's it to be?"

"Just as soon as I've got things fixed up all round," O'Dare replied, "and that won't take long."

"Where's Fifi?" Meggs demanded. "I must wish her health, wealth, and happiness with you, Denny. You're in luck all right. She's one in a thousand."

Challoner passed to O'Dare a tiny parcel, identical with that he had handed Corbyn a couple of hours before.

"I had two of 'em made," he remarked. "Thought there might be use for both, but I wasn't sure. May it bring you both the best of fortune, Denny."

O'Dare smiled beatifically as he held up the rough gold ring it contained.

"Faith, Quiff, you're a wizard," said he, "and me thinking we had kept our secret quite safe!"

They went off in a body to look for Fifi, whom they found with Lady Landguard in the music-room, and she was almost overwhelmed by the warmth of their congratulations. Landguard came in presently from an interview with Ybarra, and

Mr. Corbyn came down from his favourite corner in the deck-cabin to find out what was going on below. And they all sat there till close on dinner-time, making so much of the bold O'Dare and his blushing fiancée that Fifi, more than modest as to her own merits, became still more firmly convinced that Dennis was the most wonderful man in the world.

That night La Boca made merry over the Tiger's downfall in death, the accession to power of don Quentin Sariol, the people's friend. There were illuminations and fireworks, banquets and speeches, parades, salutes. Ybarra, on board the yacht, foamed and fretted over the news which Challoner had conveyed to him at his own urgent request, but soon regained control of himself and did not give way again even when, late next day, she put out to sea with him and his men on board.

His captors had no intention, however, of taking him with them further than was absolutely necessary, and, as soon as they had made a sufficient offering, the vessel was brought to, and a small shore-boat which Landguard had procured for that purpose was put overside. Into it the ex-President's underlings were bidden descend and did so without any question. Don Ygnacio himself was escorted as far as the gangway by the English peer, and, when he saw that he was not after all to be shanghaied, he thanked his hosts most courteously for their considerate treatment, regretting that he had not been able to make their stay in San Benito more pleasant for them.

"That's all right, old chap," said his lordship suavely. "We aren't grumblin' about anythin'. And, let me whisper one last word to you. Don't let's have any further argument about what's happened lately. We'll stay away from San Benito if you'll leave us all in peace. But if you feel that you want to discuss matters further we'll come straight back an' play the game to a finish."

"I'd rather not make any rash promises," answered Ybarra. "I'll be too busy for a time in settling accounts with my successor to think of anything else—a pity you can't stay and see the sport!—but thereafter it may be that I shall have more to say to your friend Corbyn. I'm honest with you, and—I do not know that I'm beaten."

"So be it," Lord Landguard agreed. "The moment that you lift a finger against Phil Corbyn I take a hand. And if Sariol shoots you when you get ashore it may save me the trouble. You'll pardon my frankness."

The Tiger looked up from the foot of the ladder and smiled unconcernedly.

"When I find fate," he said assuredly, "it will not be at Quentin Sariol's hands."

He stepped into the boat, and waved a parting to the group at the gangway.

"Au revoir," said he.

